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EyeToy at the VMAs
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Plus:

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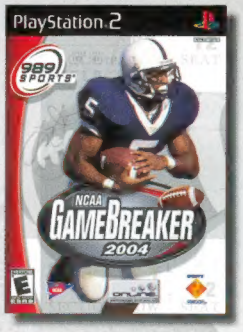

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Space for sale

Talking with developers and publishers around the industry, two things seem to be at the forefront of their busy agendas: the difficulty of integrating a non-licensed product into a stingier retail arena, and the prospect (and fate) of new, original games that don't benefit from any tie-ins or synergistic spin-offs to carry them. Launching new brands has become at once more lucrative and more difficult than ever, resulting in two schools of thought: take the time and commit the resources necessary to introduce the next big thing, or license a property and make the narrow window to reap its rewards before it goes bad.

At the other side of the spectrum lies a dragon the fierce knights of marketing cannot seem to slay: retailers and their buyers clamoring for all things branded, licensed or otherwise self-promoted, and the safety (and job security) they bring. With increasingly more games being crammed into increasingly less space, getting an unknown title into wide distribution has become an arena for the elite few giants of the business, leaving the rest to either build so much buzz in the press they get a free pass (which is becoming increasingly more difficult to do, as most magazines must fall into place with current trends), or put more eggs in fewer baskets and hope for the best. So, in the interest of not living in a world filled with 18-month-developed movie games (not that I don't enjoy them) and comic book and TV spin-offs, I offer one possible step in the right direction.

Personally, I think it's time for the gaming industry to get past the notion that Americans won't buy anything unless it's in a package they need an SUV to cart off. As cheap as 95 percent of our instruction books are, why do they need to house them in giant, ugly cases? Personally, I don't need 50 memory card transportation devices. Wouldn't you rather see more titles in jewel cases with innards more akin to that of the music industry, or better yet, in double jewel-cases with cardboard sleeves like so many import Dreamcast and PS games? And what about offering limited-edition "collectors" versions of games? My new Jane's Addiction came with an embroidered patch; *St. Anger* came in a tri-fold case housing an all-access pass for additional online content, and a pull-out art book. And you can bet that in Japan a collector's edition of Castlevania Lol will be available (likely with a gorgeous Ayami Kojima art book), but in America, it doesn't fit into the current retail scheme; yeah, that's because it sucks.

Walk into any Tower and look at the number of musical genres and titles at your fingers, new and old, to be combed through. I can go right now and buy an old Sabbath album, but try finding a selection of first generation PS2 games. Imagine the ability to search at leisure for games rather than squeeze into an isle of messy cases to flip, rubbing up against some crusty online gamer who decided to read boxes on the day you chose to brave your local game store. And has anyone been into an EB or Babbage's lately? What's that about? Unless they start dangling merchandise from the ceiling, I believe they have reached capacity. So you go to Best Buy and half the isle is taken up by one title. Hmmm, wonder what that's about?

Smaller, better packaging would please many gamers (not to mention the environment) and it might even improve the economy of games a little, although the real problem runs much deeper. What is really needed is a way to allow publishers to go back to worrying about quality instead of how they're going to survive in a heavily monopolized marketplace. Why should the potential next big thing be kept from becoming so because it comes from a small publisher? And if they're forced to surrender profits to a publishing partner, isn't it just a matter of time before a very few large publishers control the market? I think we all know where that leads, and it isn't pretty. Your thoughts, as usual, are welcome.

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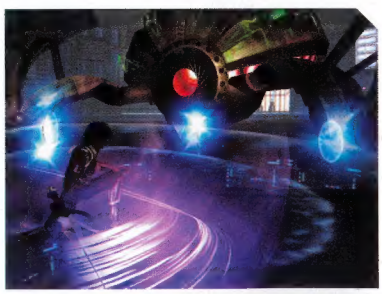

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People tend to look at you differently when you stuff a voodoo doll full of laxatives.

TEEN
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Microsoft game studios

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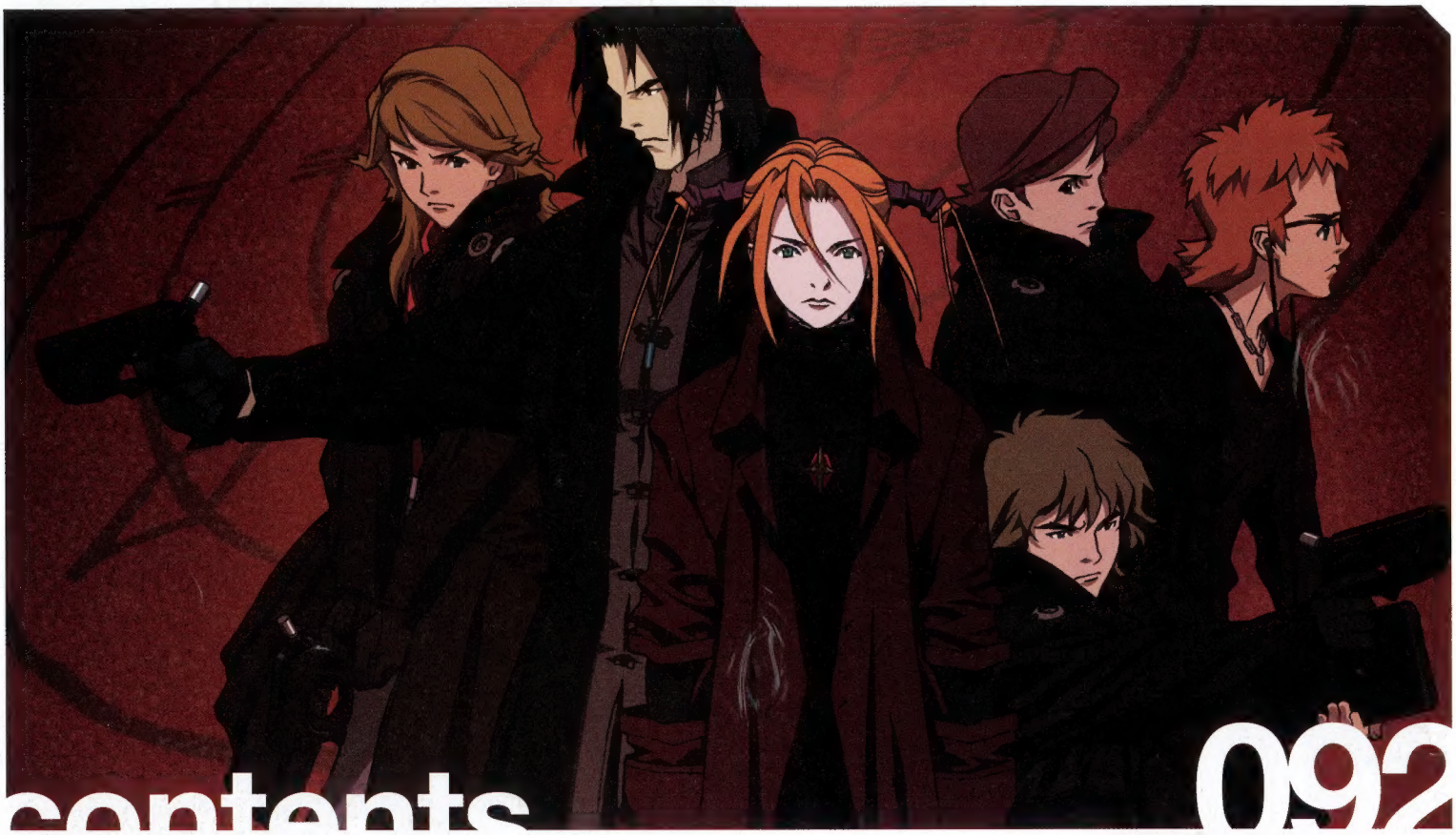

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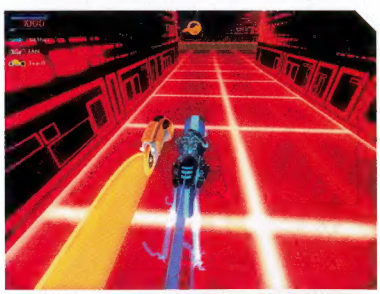

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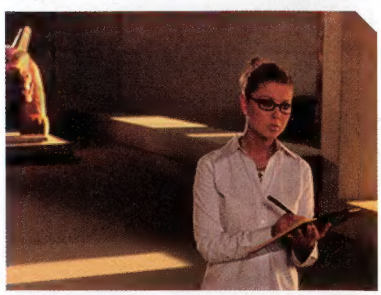

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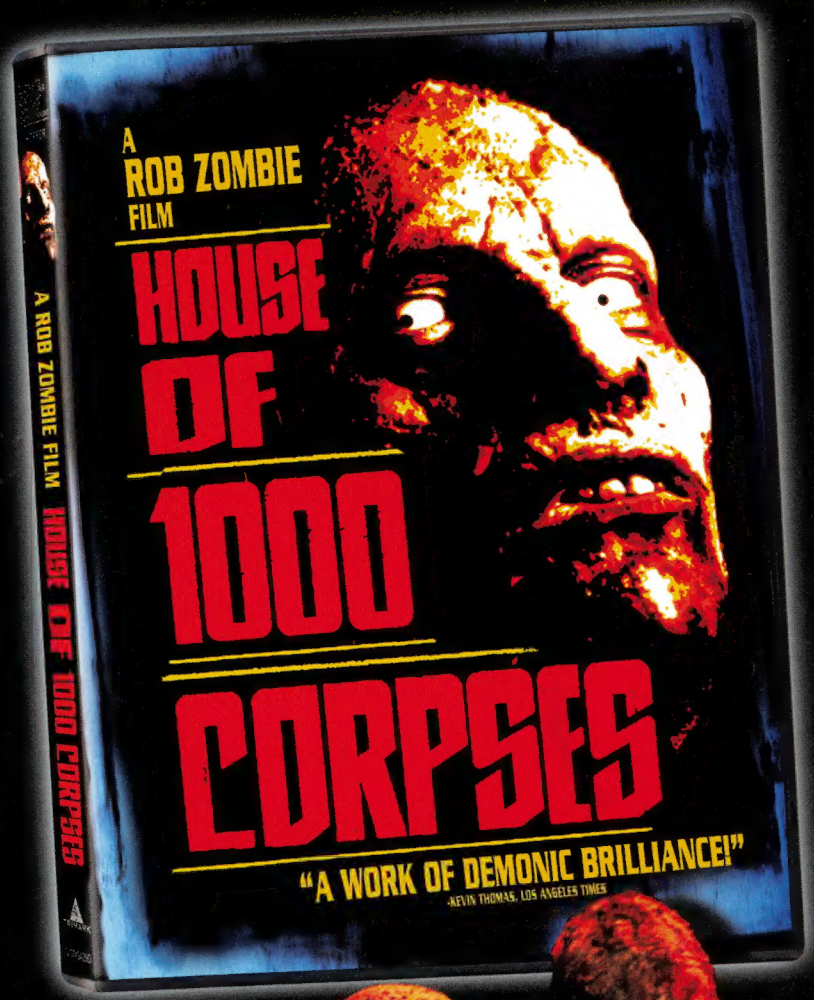
A "HOUSE" PARTY LIKE NO OTHER!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-KEVIN THOMAS, LOS ANGELES TIMES
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– Kevin Thomas, LOS ANGELES TIMES

"UNABASHEDLY SLEAZY!"
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"A MESMERIZING FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH!"
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"POSITIVELY BRILLIANT!"
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Letter of the month

My first computer was the size of a small house and encased in a wire cage to shield it from the Russians. I saw my first video game there, vectored in green. There were two controls: one for rotating a triangle that was slowly orbiting a central dot and another that fired a thruster. It was glorious! For the first time I could see the laws of motion as I maneuvered my tiny ship in the central gravity field.

We were young then. We played baseball in the bright sunshine and sweated through tough classes in unforgiving schools that didn't accept failure. Most people were religious but they also embraced science and most believed in evolution. We dreamed of going to the Moon and standing on the cratered plains.

Today we have turned away from Moon, content to be mere voyeurs of the universe. We have a national debt that could have colonized Mars. The educational system lies in shambles and most people don't believe that evolution, the keystone of science, is true. Worse, we have forgotten the lessons of history. We forget how the Islamic civilization, once the pinnacle of enlightenment and science, became a violent, repressive society when they turned away from science and embraced mysticism.

I still play video games but I am disturbed by the darkness I see there. Violence is portrayed as an agent, not to defend others, not to defend principles like truth and justice, but for the sheer thrill of destruction and death. Like the tiny triangle circling the green dot, video games still show what is possible. Beware of the dreams of youth, my friend. They betray the future.

Best,
Henry (aka "smartypants")

Mommy Dearest

Been wanting to drop you a line for quite some time now. I have subscriptions to just about every U.S. gaming mag there is. For the most part, I skim through them unless something really interesting hits my eye. The biggest reason I don't read them from cover to cover is IMMATURITY. And I have plenty of years under my belt to be able to say that!

I started gaming 29 years ago. I was gaming as a teen, student, wife, mother and now Grandma! I've seen my fair share in these years but the one trend in magazines that I find disturbing is the lack of decency and maturity. Letter sections calling people lamers and idiots. Women writing in stating they wish there was less skin and boobs featured in the magazine and the response is a roasting and "well don't buy our mag then" attitude. As for the contents, half-naked women are thrust at you whenever possible, and inane articles about what games you can play with your girlfriend sicken me. Don't get me wrong. I can certainly appreciate the female form and the beauty of graphics. But when this stuff is just thrust at you because the main demographic that reads that particular magazine is male between 15 and 21, well it just gets irritating after a while. I want SUBSTANCE and STYLE! And that is what **play** magazine has.

It's been LONG overdue, but I'm writing this letter to thank you. I read your magazine from start to finish. I have since the first issue that I read. Graphically, to me, each issue is like art. Reviews and articles have style. The variety of coverage gives me substance. You are the true gamers' magazine and I thank you!

Lots of hugs to all!
The Mom

-Thanks, Mom!

Retail Tales

I work in a video game retail store and I have been reading your wonderful magazine for two years now. When I read your articles, I can tell that everyone involved absolutely loves video games with their heart and soul. You have inspired me to want to create nothing but great games in the future, for I am studying Game Art Design and wish nothing more than to design and build the best games ever. I also hold your opinions in very high regard. If you highly recommend a game (i.e. Gunvalkyrie), I will hunt it down, and I am never disappointed. I do become very disheartened when a customer returns a game to us because it was "too hard." I find that the mass of the game players today are completely dense and have no clue what makes a fine video game. They only seem to want the most gruesome or sex-laden game possible. It boggles my mind that one so centered on such mediocre titles could actually develop the skill to hold a controller in their hands and "play" a game. I try to recommend the underdog titles to customers, such as Jet Set Radio Future, Blinx and Gunvalkyrie, but no one seems to fully comprehend the beauty of the entire game. I can only hope that I have shown people the true form of gaming and that they will on their own seek out the great games and fall in love the way I have. Continue rooting for the little guys and stay true to your roots.

> "Violence is portrayed as an agent, not to defend others, not to defend principles like truth and justice, but for the sheer thrill of destruction and death."

My Sincerest Gratitude,
Aaron N.

Larapalooza

Great job with the magazine. I've bought every issue since its arrival and keep it nicely archived next to my Dragon's Lair lunchbox. Kudos.

Anyway, I need to address something here about the whole Tomb Raider thing, since I just got back from seeing *The Cradle of Life*. My God, this has to be one of the worst movies this summer. Angelina Jolie shooting at a rock monster in nothing but a thong couldn't have saved it from its gaps of logic and its poor pacing. I remember some movie execs saying that they blamed Angel of Darkness for the poor ticket sales. Um, yeah.

I think the problem here is that both Core and the producers of the Tomb Raider movies have lost focus on the franchise. They figure that they have a girl with twin guns and big breasts and a gusto attitude and they can automatically score, but they've forgotten the very essence that makes Lara Croft the very recognizable name she is today. Back in the day, it was all about treasure collecting and adventure and all that, and now it's shifted to Lara suddenly becoming a savior of the world and battling an epic evil. Hello, the game series is called TOMB RAIDER, not Tomb Saver. It really bothers me that this has shifted and, in thus, they've totally redefined the character and made her something a little less likable, if still just as pretty and well-bosomed. I feel this shift of development over to Crystal Dynamics will be good for the series, as the folks at CD really know their stuff about forming a solid platforming game. Maybe they'll also realize the point that Lara Croft isn't "savior of the world" and put her in a game where storyline eclipses some sagging development. I certainly hope so.

I figure that it's always good to refocus on a franchise once it's lost its way. Hell, it worked for Twisted Metal, thanks to the fantastic TM Black on the PS2, so who knows? But otherwise, these developers are just going to focus on a name and in thus bury themselves with their own license. Just ask 3DO and the Army Men they've succumbed to. What happened to the great team behind Blade Force and Battlesport? Were they lost in the shuffle?

Robert "DCD"

Reader Quote of the month

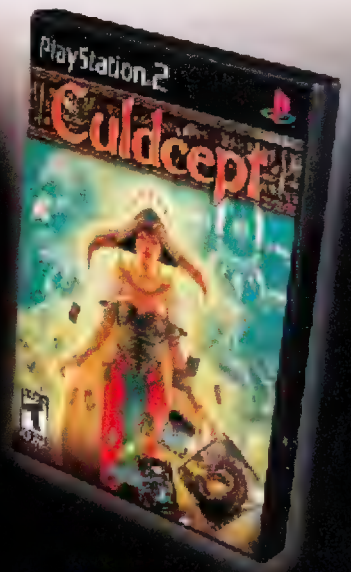
"I just hope that one day I don't have a TV that microwaves, calculates, and plays games and movies, with the only popular titles being Tony Hawk 30, Madden 2025, and Grand Theft Auto Smack My Bitch Up."

Brandon "The Sega Mage" M.

NOTE TO SELF:

WATER FAIRY MAKES LOUSY DEFENSE AGAINST GIANT PYRO DRAGON!

Culdcept... The magical card-based, land acquisition video game that has swept Japan and now has its sights set on the USA.



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Fantasy Violence
Partial Nudity

THIS IS LEGAL PLACE HOLDER...THIS IS LEGAL PLACE HOLDER...THIS IS LEGAL PLACE HOLDER...

The future of gaming is an open book

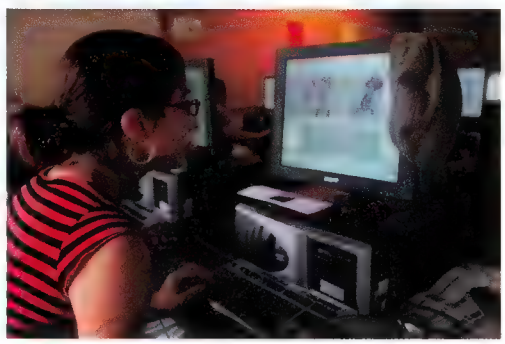
Budding game designers take heed!

So you've been playing video games for years, spending nearly every waking hour of your spare time lost in the transfixing spell of the virtual world. Games ARE your world. How do you not convince yourself it's time to start making them? Playing games is one thing; making them is an entirely different monster. Just because you're good at games, just because you burn with the passion, finding them consuming your thoughts and conversations, doesn't mean you can just knock on a developer's door and land a dream job. And how do you know if you even have what it takes to be a part of the intensive process of taking an idea from conception to playable product? So many questions, and now one newly emerging answer: enroll in game design school.

Up until a few years ago, the idea of a college offering game programs was completely foreign; DigiPen, a school you've most certainly heard of, was one of the first to pop up offering respectable programs, but now even universities such as USC and Carnegie Mellon are part of the mix. Some programs are two years, some involve varied bachelor degrees with an emphasis on gamemaking, like The Art Institute of California's game art and design Bachelor of Science.

Ask yourself where your talents lie: do you want to focus on math, illustration, 3D rendering? Every school will offer something a bit different, boasting a specific aspect of their program they feel is key to success. The University of Advancing Technologies in Tempe, Arizona, for example, points out that they're one of the only universities that base their programs on the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) guidelines. What value this truly holds is one point where game schools shows their neophyte trappings: what is important, what isn't, what are the people who are going to hire you looking for? Such answers haven't really been established. Naughty Dog's Jason Rubin, for example, recently commented that he rarely hires out of school anyways; someone he did actually hire was chosen quite simply because the artist's portfolio rocked, not because of their accreditation. You can't teach talent.

One thing to keep in mind is that, like approaching any college-curriculum focus you might be considering, do your research and carefully weigh the details that vary from place to place. "A student that is considering a school should definitely go to the campus and get an idea of the layout and the infrastructure," says Rob Catto, program director of Digital Media/Game Design and Development at Florida-



Tiffany at the Art Institute of California—San Francisco hard at work (above); the school's new facilities (top); students study the form of a cheetah and battle in a tournament (top, opposite).

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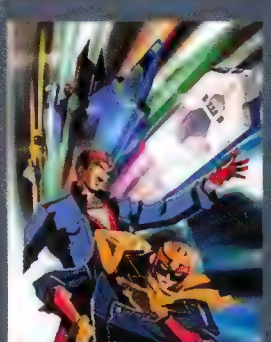
Future game modeler? Academy of Art College student Anton Gretchko goes alien (left). A stylish creation out of the University of Advancing Technologies (above).

based Full Sail. "They should take a tour of the facilities and speak with current students about the experience that they will have. Be sure to look over the current faculty listing to see just who will be teaching the courses and what kind of industry experience those people have." And that's a key point: it just seems to make sense to find a school where instructors and guest speakers know the industry and, above all, reside from it.

It's important, too, to understand that there is a difference between being an artist and excelling as a technician. A school like the Academy of Art College in San Francisco places heavy emphasis on their students understanding traditional artistry before jumping onto the computer to work through the new hurdles of artistic creation.

With game design becoming such an incredibly complex process, the definition and role of game designer runs across the board. The opportunity to cultivate your individual talents and join the team is now more possible than ever. A college education has never looked so good.

F-Zero speeds its way into the annals of anime



F-Zero: A big, bright, shining star in anime's future?

As this issue goes to press, F-Zero GX has just been released at American retail, re-introducing gamers to the thrills of futuristic machine racing. But the breakneck action is already set to continue. Nintendo of Japan recently revealed that an F-Zero anime is in the works and will debut on the TV Tokyo Network on Oct. 7, 2003. Titled F-Zero: Falcon's Densetsu, the series stars, not surprisingly, bounty hunter/pilot extraordinaire Captain Falcon, as well as other characters from the game, such as Jody Summers, Samurai Goroh, Dr. Stewart, Jack Levin, Super Arrow and Mr. EAD. A new character, ex-detective Ryu Suzaku, awakened after 150 years in a cryogenic sleep, will also play a prominent role, and he has deep ties to the series' villain, Zoda. Strangely enough, the series, according to Nintendo's Japanese website, is set in the year 2201, even though the game manual explains that F-Zero began in the 26th century. Regardless, F-Zero: Falcon's Densetsu will feature 3D CG graphics for the supersonic racing sequences, as well as hand-drawn 2D visuals for the characters to help convey emotion. While the anime is being produced by two of Bandai's studios—Dentsu and Ashi Group—the busiest man in gaming, Shigeru Miyamoto, will be a project supervisor, alongside Takayasu Imamura. No word yet on a U.S. release, but we wouldn't be surprised.

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A Rare offer from THQ

Ever since we saw it at E3 2001, we've been wondering what would happen to Rare's Game Boy Advance line-up, especially after Microsoft snatched up the developer to take them to Xbox land. The question has finally been answered: a quartet of games is still on its way thanks to a distribution agreement with THQ. The first title on the list is Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge, scheduled for release this fall, followed by Sabre Wulf in the winter and then Banjo Pilot (formerly Diddy Kong Pilot) and It's Mr. Pants in 2004. It's unknown yet if It's Mr. Pants is the game formerly known as DK's Coconut Crackers, but considering how addictive the little puzzle game was when it was last seen, we certainly hope so. It's a strange, strange world we live in where Microsoft is battling Nintendo tooth and nail on the console front, yet they're profiting from them with GBA games...strange indeed.

How will the bear fare on GBA sans all the platforming that made the 64 game so great?

Games on the fly

So you're sitting on the couch, drooling on yourself as you pass out in boredom. You need another game to play, and there's no way you're driving to Blockbuster to do nothing more than discover that the over-priced game you want isn't available. You dread the inevitable late fees just waiting to be accrued as you yearn to keep the game for a few more days. What to do? Check out what we feel is the best online rental store for video games on the 'net, GameFly (www.gamefly.com). This easy-to-navigate, superbly designed, impressively stocked site will ship you two games at once, allowing you to keep them for as long as you want. All you need to do is plop down $21.95 a month, and when you decide you're done with your initial choice—no need to worry about shipping costs, and the games arrive within a couple days—simply return them for more. There's no monthly limit, and best of all, if you dig what you played, you can buy it to add to your permanent collection. GameFly also sells a wide variety of used games, which are only rented once to ensure there isn't the recycled threat you sometimes get with these types of services. Now that Game Boy Advance has finally been added to the mix, GameFly is a gold mine for convenient rentals. Keep an eye out for the soon-to-be-added walkthrough section, which will offer detailed FAQs with the help of Gamefaqs.

Crank was rank?

It's been a while since anything's been shown on Midway's multi-format platformer Crank The Weasel, and there's a reason—the game's been canceled. No particulars have been revealed, but it seems that the project, which was often compared to Conker's Bad Fur Day, just wasn't coming together. Guess we'll just have to wait to get our fill of foul-mouthed critters on the Xbox.

3DO still Horsing around

Ever since 3DO filed for bankruptcy back on May 28, one major question has remained: what will become of the products and franchises that were already in development? That question has now been answered, at least in part. In a bankruptcy auction held Aug. 14, Namco acquired the rights to Street Racing Syndicate for around $1.5 million, Ubi Soft picked up the Might & Magic franchise for near $1.3 million, and Microsoft now owns High Heat Baseball, though the sale amount wasn't disclosed. High Heat's acquisition is particularly exciting: the best baseball sim around, now infused with Microsoft's muscle, has a lot of potential. Other participants in the auction included Eidos and Crave Entertainment. Strangely, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which seemed to be boasting high production values if nothing else, has not yet been acquired. Thankfully, neither has Army Men.

Shaka Kong

Nintendo classics are always being prepared for updated appearances on new systems, and the latest revivals on their way to the Cube are both exciting and bizarre. It's no secret that an update to Donkey Kong has long been in the works, but we never would have guessed it would be co-developed by Namco, let alone that the new DK would be a rhythm/music game. Titled Donkey Konga, the game will likely include conga drum peripherals, and reportedly came about because of Shigeru Miyamoto's appreciation of Sega's Samba de Amigo. Less dramatically, Nintendo of Europe recently leaked the word that Paper Mario is making its way to the GC in 2004, although they didn't reveal if it was a remake of the excellent Nintendo 64 game or a sequel.

Paper Mario's coming back; so is Donkey Kong, in a rhythm game co-developed by Namco.

Recording for Duty

If Call of Duty didn't already have enough ammunition to claim victory in the upcoming war for best first-person shooter, the cannon is being filled even heavier with a line of impressive Hollywood talent joining up. The most important addition to the creative team comes in the form of writer/producer Michael Schiffer ("Crimson Tide," "Lean on Me," "Very Bad Things," "The Peacemaker"), who has helped write the game's extensive script. "I loved working on Call of Duty," said Schiffer. "I couldn't believe the graphics. I lived in France and thought I was back there. The feel of combat is incredible and we tried to give the soldiers real character and humor to make playing it even more intense." With storytelling becoming such an integral part of many of the new crop of FPS titles, his talents are a huge addition. Further embellishing the impressive presence of Call of Duty are the voice talents of actors Jason Statham ("Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels") and Giovanni Ribisi ("The Gift"), both playing key roles in the game's plot.

Gamers want soul, will do anything to get it!

Tuesday, Aug. 26 was a day of madness and mayhem in video game stores across the country thanks to a little game called Soul Calibur 2. Casual players had no place to run or hide, as masses of fighting freaks in their teens and 20s (some who likely haven't left their houses since the first Soul Calibur came out) filled store aisles and crowded about demo machines, waiting to be among the first to take home the sequel to Namco's legendary fighter. Free Mountain Dew and other nourishment were often provided to fill the still-burning souls of the assemblage; pictured here are 200 New York City gamers standing in line in the parking lot of Electronics Boutique in Union Square to enjoy food, drinks and prizes before running home in celebration. For those of you who didn't pick Soul Calibur 2 up at launch, we hear the crowds have died down now.

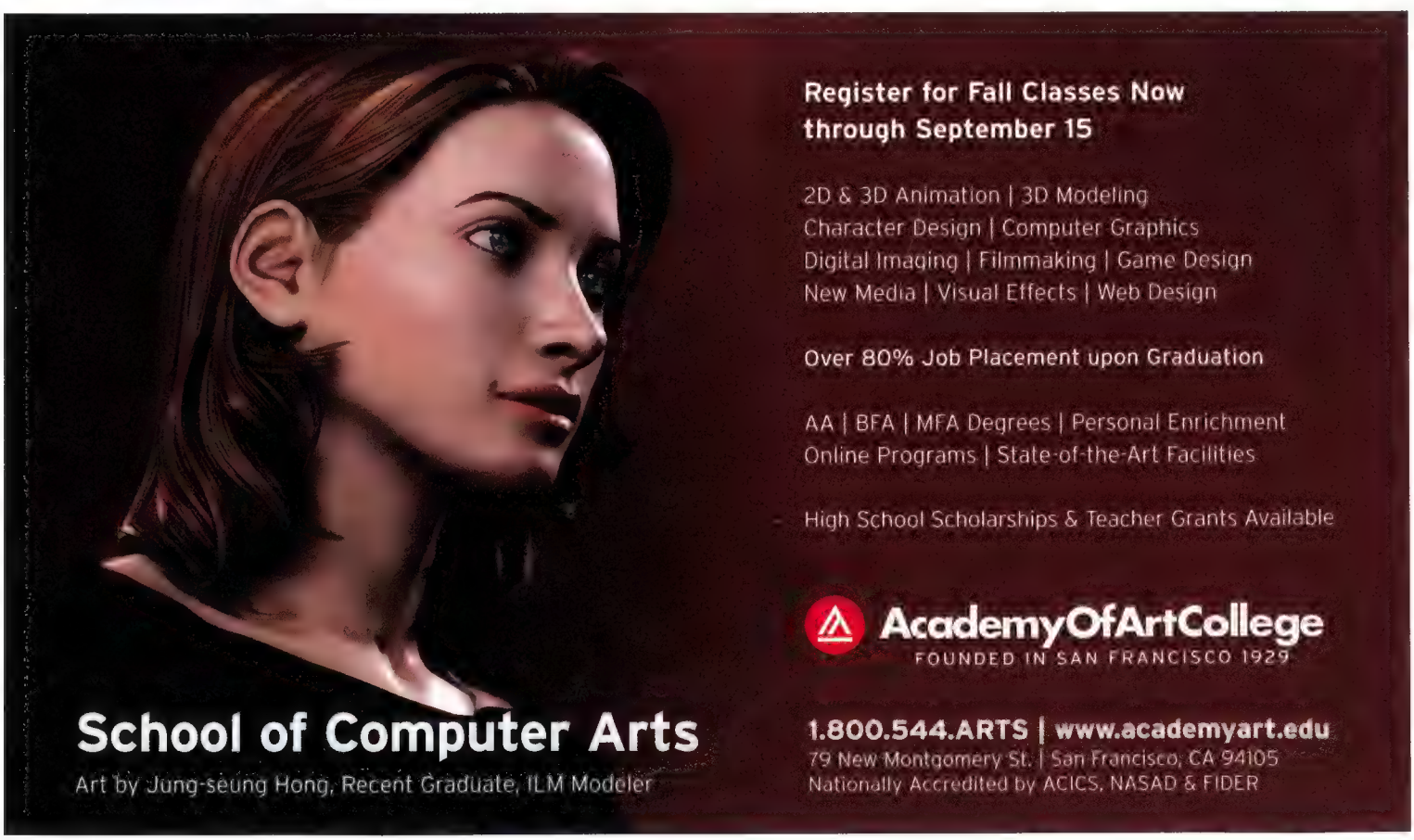
What, no cosplayers?

Pick your Pocket

Many challengers have fallen before the might of Nintendo's Game Boy empire, but none managed to put up as impressive a fight or gain favor among hardcore handheld enthusiasts as SNK's Neo Geo Pocket. Though the little handheld that couldn't is now defunct, players once again have a chance to get their hands on the excellent 16-bit system, which has been resurrected and returned to the U.S. by New York-based Ellen's Software Collection. Not endorsed by SNK, the company has acquired and repackaged an amount of primarily Japanese overstock—both systems and games—and are making them available for discount prices in the U.S. once again "for your pleasure," as the package states. Among the premier titles once again available are SNK vs. Capcom: Match of the Millennium, SNK vs. Capcom: Cardfighters' Clash, Fatal Fury First Contact, Samurai Shodown 2, Metal Slug 1st Mission, Sonic the Hedgehog and The Last Blade. The repackaged Neo Geo Pocket can be found at retail or purchased from www.eplayplay.com.

NEOGEO POCKET™

All we ever wanted was a handheld version of Magician Lord...and a light.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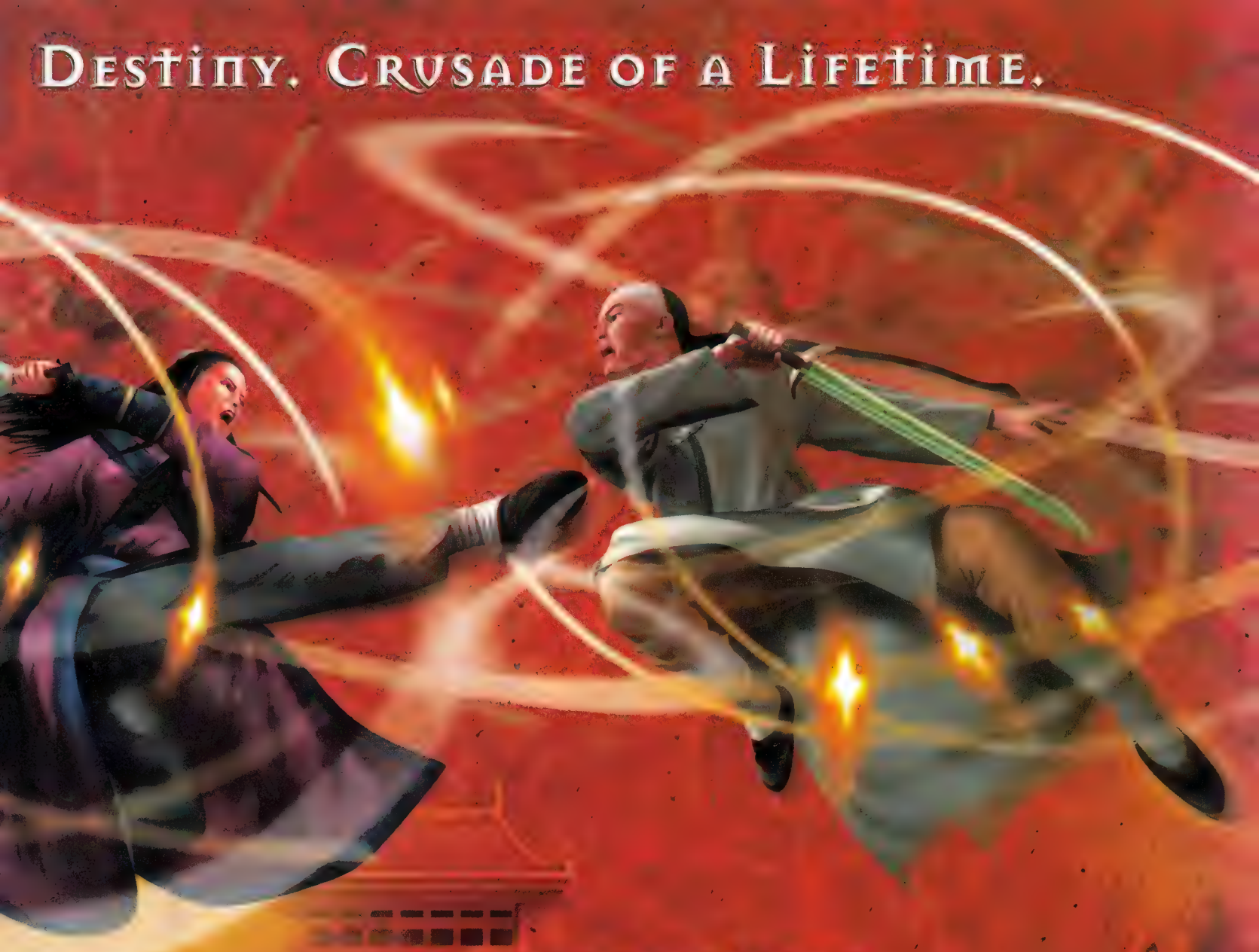
Destiny. Crusade of a Lifetime.



Rediscover the Legend.

Three years ago, **Ang Lee's** *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* became an instant martial arts classic, earning an Academy Award® for Best Foreign Film. Now, experience all the kung-fu fury from this martial-arts masterpiece as you execute over 90 wu xia moves inspired by renowned choreographer Yuen Wo Ping. Green Destiny beckons you. Rediscover the legend.

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GAME BOY ADVANCE

Art: Konami's Boktai: The Sun is in Your Hand

review

Joe

The ultimate 'Cube exclusive takes the stage

words dave halverson

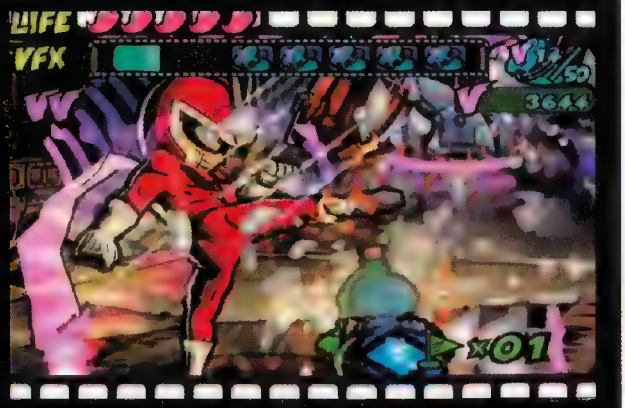
system:
developer:
publisher:
available:

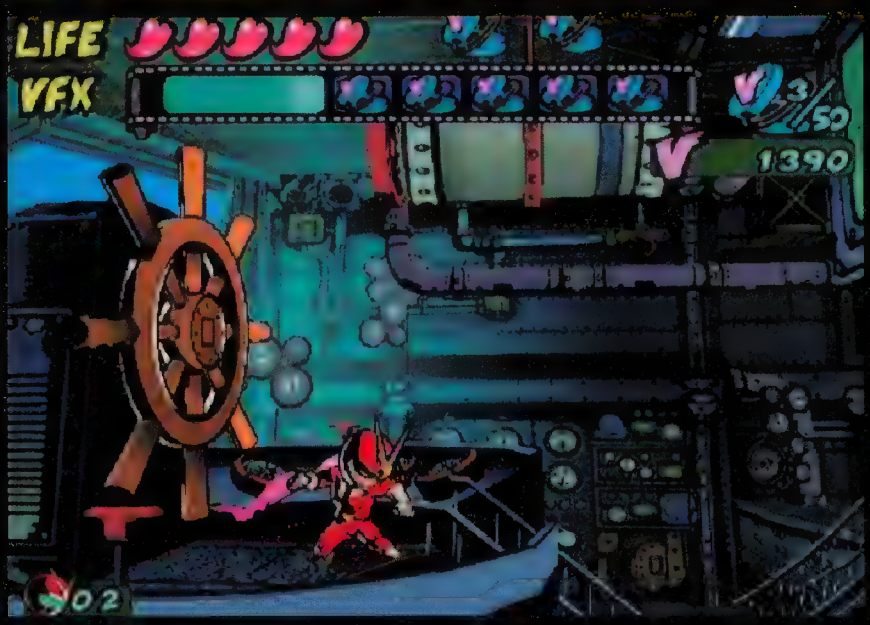
The buzz began the moment the first screens hit, it Henshin-a-go-goed its way through E3 and the import release, and now it's finally here—the first original 2D platformer for GameCube, from the company that helped put them on the map: Viewtiful Joe.

In a bittersweet twist of fate, Joe's arrival comes at a precarious time for the mother of all first parties, huddled between the tail end of Nintendo's first underachieving console and the promise of setting the world on fire yet again. Would things have been any different had they kept the bloodline flowing with a 2D Metroid, a more conventional Zelda and continued dedication to the kind of first-party magic that captivated a generation? Perhaps, but regardless, the hand has been dealt, and now Joe must fight an uphill battle. Let's hope that the Nintendo faithful have hung around long enough to partake in the kind of 2D power they've been waiting two years for.

Viewtiful Joe is genius, pure genius... Not since Ghouls 'n Ghosts have I been so enthralled (or brutalized) by a Capcom platformer, to the extent that I almost can't believe the game has made its way to America intact. Everything needed to stir the soul of anesthetized gamers everywhere is in here. Just when you think you've seen it all, some designer somewhere in a corner of Japan hits the great-idea lotto and a genre is reborn. As great a game Viewtiful Joe is, it's doubtful 2D will ever make a full recovery, but playing it makes me wish for almost nothing more.

The secret—amidst a sea of play mechanics so deep no two people will play the game alike—is the way the action is built with the explicit purpose of exploiting three core play mechanics: Slow, Mach Speed and Zoom (along with variations on each). Where other games may decelerate time to affect the action, Viewtiful Joe's VFX affects the world, allowing Joe to manipulate things in the material realm, commanding the trajectory of floating platforms and





changing topography to open his way. What Ohshima began with Blinx, Inaba and Mikami have now finished, elevating time manipulation to an art form by doing everything in real time. Slowing engine combustion, for instance, Joe can build exhaust pressure and then reverse the flow, controlling the trajectory of missiles and vehicles; slowing drips of water over lava causes them to swell and form platforms, cauterizing on the magma below. VFX powers aren't just a hook—they're more like a genre unto themselves. There's never been anything like Viewtiful Joe. By the time you've purchased enough moves and items to pump Joe up, you'll be using the entire GameCube pad the way it was meant to be, which is a beautiful thing: your hands do things your eyes can barely believe.

Using his powers in combat, Joe's whirling enemies—a blur of impenetrable speed—become fodder for any number of viewtiful attacks. Enemy projectiles become Joe's homing beacon, Mach Speed can extinguish fire (among other things), and Zoom becomes the ultimate tool of spinning destruction. The combat literally never stops evolving. To detail the range of available attacks and the most efficient way to utilize them against each enemy type would take a strategy guide. But don't you dare; it's also something you'll want to discover for yourself. Half the fun of this game is getting to know it, having it kick your ass, so you can kick it back. A more nuanced set of play mechanics simply does not exist, and these bosses—belligerent and weird to the core—rank among the nastiest you've likely ever met.

As great a technical effort Viewtiful Joe is, its greatest asset may well be its viewtiful style. Wrapped in a Holly-weird package that drips with more cool than a Mc G marathon, it's never merely about winning but doing so with the utmost style; after all, Joe is a budding action star. To get the most out of Joe (the pinnacle being infinite VFX), you need to get a V-ranking in every section, which is Battletoads-hard. Don't even think about it your first time through. It's best to bond with Joe in "Kids," then beat it on "Adult" to unlock Super Joe; then with full command of every move, combo, and nuance, dive in for the fight of your life.

The look of the game, too, is a testament to style over substance—simple architecture made great by ingenuity and artistry. The game's straightforward geometry is layered with 2D

art-like set dressing—part diorama, part cel-shaded polygons—producing a look that you have to see in motion to truly appreciate. I couldn't get enough of the music either, which, given the nature of the game, is a brilliant piece of work in its own right. Rather than try to drive the game, it needed to fuse with it, like a great movie, and so it has been done. The game never sits still like, say, a Castlevania, where you might stop and soak it all in. It's manic from end to end, and the sound designer nailed it.

So, is Viewtiful Joe without flaw? Well, while it might cause many a WaveBird to actually take flight, I'd have to say "yes," or at least it's darn close. From a technical standpoint, it's tuned to perfection, and it looks and feels like nothing else—a product of great programming and of course 2D, an altogether simpler approach to gamemaking fraught with far fewer pitfalls and far more instant (and constant) gratification. Not having to draw far into the distance, special effects and character integrity flourish, and Viewtiful Joe is overflowing with both. One thing I've personally never cared for are later levels that regurgitate harder versions of conquered bosses in succession with no saves in between, and VJ has a brutal one, but this is a game meant to be mastered, not merely played, so I can't call that a fault. The beauty of Viewtiful Joe is that there's a way to kill everything easily; it's discovering how that's key, which goes to patience and perseverance, something modern gamers may be in short supply of.

Liken Viewtiful Joe to what Ninja Gaiden was back in the heyday of 8-bit. You might have played the same level for an entire day until every inch was committed to memory—you may even remember it still—the mark of a truly great game. It's akin to Magician Lord, Battletoads in Battle Maniacs, Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Alien Soldier and Contra: Hard Corps…but what was once commonplace is now very rare, so get it, love it and tell a friend. If VJ hits, we'll likely see more; if not, don't expect Capcom to keep climbing out on this limb. Whether or not Viewtiful Joe is the Japanese juggernaut that will kick the industry back into the proper gear remains to be seen, but at the very least it's the sweetest swan song any of us could ever hope for. A

"Where other games may decelerate time to affect the action, Viewtiful Joe's VFX affects the world, allowing Joe to manipulate things in the material realm."

Zoom (above right) provides some of the most manic moments ever seen in a video game.
In real-time, those missiles would be a blur, but with VFX power, they're kid's stuff.
LIFE
VFX
2435

Interview

An interview with Atsushi Inaba (producer for Resident Evil Code: Veronica [PS2], Viewtiful Joe and Steel Battalion) and Hideki Kamiya, creative director for Capcom R&D Studio 4. Kamiya's body of work includes Viewtiful Joe, Resident Evil 2 and Devil May Cry. He's also beaten Zelda for the Super Nintendo without saving the game once!

play: First, I'd like to say thank you for creating this incredible new game. I hope it goes on forever... Joe should be the next Mega Man! So, is Viewtiful Joe your original concept? How and where did you come up with the idea?
Kamiya: Yes, it is... Actually, we have this motion software that lists the number of frames within graphics. One day I was watching it count the frames and noticed there is a function where you can fast-forward one frame at a time. Then it occurred to me that using those "effects" in an action game would look pretty cool. So we started hammering out the concept.

How did you arrive at Joe's look? MTV?
Kamiya: No. MTV was not an influence. Actually, let's talk about heroes in general. What are some of your common ones? Batman? Daredevil? Most of these guys are really upstanding citizens. You know, the type that follow the rules to a T. They aren't like you and me. They aren't "normal." I wanted a hero everyone could relate to, an average guy. Your average, everyday... um...Joe. And by giving him street clothes, he comes off just like that. The kind of guy you could see yourself chatting with.

Of all Production Studio 4's projects, would you say that Joe is regarded as the one most likely to spawn a franchise?
Inaba: Yes.

You're breathing new life into 2D, a genre many new players were never lucky enough to fully experience and one that its fans miss. Did you choose 2D with the purpose of re-introducing the genre?
Inaba: Actually, I'd have to say that the game chose 2D. The game is really suitable for 2D and 2D alone. We didn't plan to create an old-school revival; it just merely turned into that type of game. A lot of artists don't know what kind of a finished product they will come up with when they first sit in front of that white canvas. For a game creator, it's much the same way. You just don't know until you are done.

Tell us about how you came up with the idea to transport your characters into a movie. What came first: the play mechanics or the concept?
Kamiya: Once we had determined that we were going to use a character with FX, we realized that he had to be a hero. But where do you find hero FX such as zoom, slow-mo, etc? The first thing that comes to mind is movies. Therefore, putting Joe in a movie world was an obvious choice. So, it was the play mechanics that basically decided the whole game.

Does Viewtiful Joe have any connection with the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Last Action Hero*, where a boy is transported into an action film to help his favorite action hero? Had you seen it?
Kamiya: I have seen it. But no, there is no connection.

You must be a super hero fan yourself to have come up with this scenario. What are some of your favorites? I can see Gundam and Ultraman in here...
Kamiya: Good call. But actually I am a huge fan of the original Ranger Five. Also, I love the Masked Rider. For any of those readers out there that know the series, the Masked Rider always does a lot of cool poses.

Did you tinker much with the character design or was the super-deformed (SD) look decided on from the beginning?
Kamiya: Nope. Joe's design hasn't changed much at all since the project began.

How does one go about creating the type of environments/backgrounds used in the game?
Kamiya: We used a lot of techniques for the game, including creating 3D models, rendering them into 2D and then adding some touch-up effects to produce that specific look that is so unique to the game.

The special effects in the game are amazing. How difficult was it to achieve the slow, fast and zoom to the extent that you have?
Kamiya: It was a lot of trial and error. For example, if we had an explosion on the screen, we had to make it big and bright enough to look cool. However, if it's too big, it would merely get in the way. Same applies with the game speed. It has to be challenging enough, yet still controllable. We were doing game balancing right up until the game went gold.

The script is excellent. What type of research did you do to assemble the story and capture a classic B-movie flavor? Is it based on any certain work?
Kamiya: The game is not based on one particular piece of work. It has been influenced by the whole B-movie genre. I mean, it's your basic run-of-the-mill hero. The dastardly villain. The hero rescuing his love. These are all themes you see in every B-movie (and in some A-level movies too). A lot of the jokes and plot twists are designed so that a young kid could see them and laugh/appreciate them. When you are a kid, it's cool to transform into a hero and beat up the bad guys.

This game design seems to hinge on technique and the choices gamers make purchasing moves and limited items. Besides encouraging replay, how vital are these components to beating each level and the bosses?
Kamiya: They aren't vital. You can beat the whole game without using the FX. It will be damn hard but you can do it. I like to make a game that way. There are hardcore gamers in Japan that love challenges. So much so, that they will try to beat a game without power ups. Some are quite capable of doing it.

Since style is such a big part of the experience, how are you rewarding the player for a great performance?
Kamiya: The more style you have, the more money you get. The more money, the more moves. The more moves, the easier the game is to beat. The more times you beat the game, the more extras you will get.

Music is a huge part of the Viewtiful Joe experience. Joe's narrator and music are spot-on. Who was the sound designer and how rigorous was it to perfect?
Kamiya: Mr. Wada is the sound designer for the game. He states the game is his best work.

You work for a company that encourages and supports new ideas and risky ventures above all others. What allows Capcom to be so dynamic, and do you worry that gaming going mainstream will erode this wonderful philosophy?
Kamiya: My boss, Mr. Mikami, gives us a lot of freedom. He convinces the company that it's a good risk and they let us.

Coming off of Steel Battalion, you must feel great personal satisfaction that you've been able to put something unique into the world not once but twice. So what's next for you? Might we see the Steel Battalion controllers put to future use?
Inaba: Of course we have something in the works. Of course it will be great. What is it? I wish I could tell you. Regarding the controller, it has been well received, so who knows?

The GameCube has fallen on somewhat hard times. If Joe doesn't find an audience on the GameCube, do you have the option of porting it to PS2 and Xbox? The format seems good for handheld too. Might we see a Viewtiful Joe for GBA or Sony's PSP?
Inaba: Currently we have no other plans for VJ. For now, that is.

Any last words to all of the gamers out there about to partake in your latest creation?
Inaba: I think that VJ is a great game. It's simple yet so pure. It's a gamer's game and I really feel you won't see anything like it for a long time to come.
Kamiya: We, as creators, have the responsibility of creating fun games. Some of those games need to be original so we don't get stuck in the same rut. But you, as the consumer, are going to have to support us by wanting to try something new. Currently our market is about making one hit and then only pushing out sequels. But is that really fun? The gamer has a responsibility to spend some of his hard-earned cash on not only the safe and secure sequels. Everyone should try a few new and original games now and then...whether it is Joe or not. **play**

"Everyone should try a few new and original games now and then...whether it is Joe or not."

Sudeki

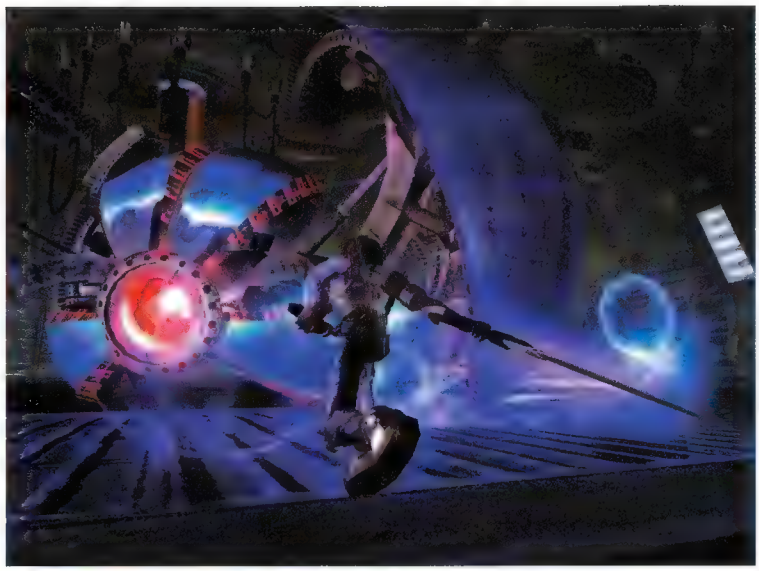
Climax's tale of gods and monsters defines polygonal beauty

words dave halverson

system: [illegible]
developer: climax
publisher: microsoft
available: [illegible]

Tetsu, heir to the Realm of Omnion, Lord of Sudeki and all of its inhabitants, longed for another god to share his celestial home, so from his crystal skin another child was born. Yet slicing one from light, darkness was torn, and although at first the two celebrated and shared their dominion, harmony was short-lived. The ensuing struggle would leave the world of Sudeki torn asunder, and the four subjects who stood to slay the beast, themselves split in two. A millennium later, the Omnion prophecy has long since passed into legend, but its legacy remains. The two worlds of Sudeki have grown in tandem for 1000 years and recently in the peaceful kingdom of Haskilla, "light spawn" have appeared, raiding the countryside and terrifying the local population. The game begins as Tal, a royal guardsman, is sent to escort the princess Ailish from a neighboring village, New Brightwater.

It used to happen all the time, especially during the 16-bit era; I'd get so charged up for a new release it'd be the first thing that popped into my head each morning and the last as I fell asleep. This doesn't happen so much anymore. I love games more than ever and look forward to dozens of new releases each year—never taking for granted the fact that they pile through the door in various states of completion—but rarely does one have that dramatic effect on me. Sudeki has. I love action RPGs, but in my opinion, they've never risen above the standard set by Landstalker and Ocarina of Time. We haven't had that next evolution of story meets gameplay, set among visuals astounding for the time. I suspected Sudeki to be that game, and after spending a



I've played mere hours into the game and I'm already missing it. I hope I can last until April.

precious few hours with a quest of my very own (after much begging), I think I may be right.

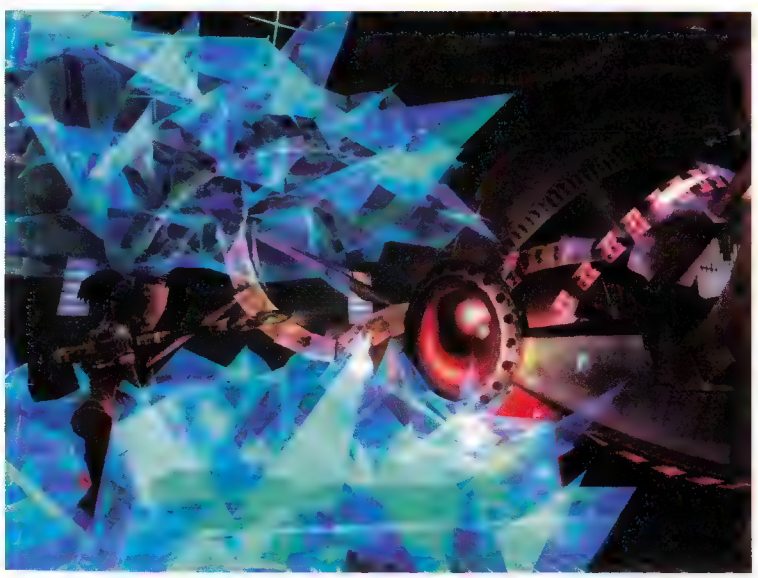
Sudeki was to be this month's cover, but Climax has wisely decided to hold onto to it for a little longer (until April), polishing, optimizing, and generally buttoning it up as well as it deserves to be. There's so much in this game you'd think it took 10 years to make, so it's not only understandable but welcome. If this one doesn't launch a franchise, gaming is lost.

The quest I played, beyond the exquisite narrative and maiden cinema (Climax either love Grandia or are channeling Game Arts) took Tal from the Illumina kingdom through the neighboring countryside (dotted in horribly decimated corpses) to New Brightwater, so I was able to get a good look at the battle system and overall structure of the game. The visuals are everything I'd hoped, indicative of the screens I've been disbelieving, and more to the extent that I almost feel like I'm playing my first "real" Xbox game since Halo. The characters are not yet polished in terms of animation and physics (and they still look great), but the villages and countryside boast a level of detail you really need to experience to believe. The sea doesn't just shine, it rolls, and within houses, ovens, trinkets, tables, chairs, jars, books, bottles, you name it, give form to livable quarters. A woman baking pies makes the motions of rolling dough, and every character has independently moving eyes and fingers. You've seen the outside, and that's real too; I don't know how, but it is, and it's not locked down—you can spin it! Then there's what you don't see, like petals falling from trees, collecting on the ground, perfect butterflies fluttering about, sprays of water over rocks, people fishing (really fishing)...the bolts on the fences have detail. Really, it's just sick.

Onto the battles. Sudeki uses a pseudo-lock-on system, allowing Tal to easily focus his attacks but quickly change direction; the target is locked but your movement is not. A simple yet very effective combo system guides his sword, and he has a block and roll similar to Link's. Climax has no inhibition about spilling blood either, and the super-detailed enemies have buckets to spill. Using Y to slow the action to a crawl, healing, magic and other in-fight management takes place in real time (which works brilliantly), although you can also assign vials and items to the D-pad for quick fixes. Magic is used in the same way for dramatic effect and looks insanely good. Essentially, the battles rock; you can switch on the fly to anyone in your party and the others will act instinctively. Although Ailish's battle controls weren't final, they were equally (if not more so) compelling, but since they're bound to change, I'll leave that for another day. One last thing: between battles, your party doesn't melt into your lead character's body—they follow.

Elsewhere, all is either as it should be, or better. Earned abilities allow you to build your characters in several ways, there's a handy Quest Log, you can earn and enchant weapons and armor (and even transfer enchantment), maps guide your way, and there are shops and inns to explore—all the depth you can imagine, in a game universe intriguing enough to be worthy of it. What I found especially fascinating, however, was that Climax seem to be recording voice for nearly every villager, vendor and soldier in the game, and there are few locked doors. Sudeki has a real culture and religion among its people, both human and Anthopormorph (animal people), making it feel very much like a real place, not a ruse like a Hollywood set. Looks like I have something to dream about until April, and if you like your action epics with storybook appeal, so do you. **play**

"The sea doesn't just shine, it rolls, and within houses, ovens, trinkets, tables, chairs, jars, books, bottles, you name it, give form to livable quarters."



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R-Type Final

One last hurrah for the classic series

words michael hobbs

system: playstation 2
developer: irem software engineering
publisher: irem
available: q1 2004

I've got a lot of great memories of this series. I'll never forget marvelling at the two-part PC-Engine arcade conversion, the awesome slow-down-laden Super R-Type on SNES, all the way up to R-Type Delta on PlayStation, certainly one of the best (and only) horizontal shooters of the past several years.

Which brings us to the latest, and judging by the title, presumably the last entry in this venerable series. Perhaps a a result, R-Type Final represents a little bit of a departure from the previous games, but thankfully, all the classic cues are present. The gameplay is still based around the idea of using this armored ball which can be attached to the front or back of your ship to absorb bullets, or thrown out into the enemies causing damage. The big change here is the addition of 99 different player craft that can be opened up. Obviously, I haven't seem them all yet, but the ones I've sampled each have different ways of using powerups and different basic capabilities, making it fun to experiment with the various styles of play. In addition, the levels will sometimes be a little bit different depending upon the ship that you choose. But regardless of the ship you choose, R-Type is a rather strategic shooter relative to the rest of the genre, and you really have to work out how you are going to use your various capabilities and weapons to survive.

Graphically, R-Type Final gets the job done admirably, showing me a few things I've not seen in a shooter before like water physics. I was very excited when I first noticed that the water beneath me in the second level would react visually to my ship as I dipped into it. And I was blown away by the third level. Like all R-Types, the third level is one huge ship that you must render defenseless from the outside and then dive into its core to deliver the finishing blow. In R-Type Final, this encounter takes place over a city, and there is this terrific moment when the view switches to an overhead one and you see pieces of the ship falling to the street below as you attack.

My first look at R-Type Final was a good one, but then I've always loved this series, and I love shooters. If you are the same, you're in for a treat. **play**

"R-Type Final represents a little bit of a departure from the previous games, but thankfully, all the classic cues are present."

This partially underwater level is one of the graphical highlights of R-Type Final.

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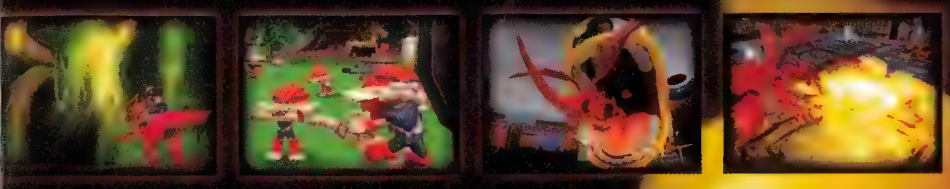

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Go! Go! Hypergrind

Nothing strange going on here, 'cept for...everything!

system gamecube
developer team poponchi
publisher atlus
available october

"GGH takes the tried-and-true boarding formula to strange new places..."

words dave halverson

Crossbreeding can be dangerous, as evidenced by Go! Go! Hypergrind, Atlus' extreme skating concoction that fuses the comedic styling of Spumco (of *Ren & Stimpy* fame) with a Japanese-flavored skateboarding game, giving rise to essentially Tony Hawk's Jet Set Radio Absurd on acid. Breaking convention (and then beating it with a large stick), GGH takes the tried-and-true boarding formula to strange new places, adding bizarre twists to the typical to-do list drudgery.

Dropped into the cartoon equivalent of *American Idol*, where toon actors vie for super-stardom and the endorsement of their demented director Kevin, you're made to pull off the usual array of mad lip, grind and air tricks (or variations thereof), but moreover are directed to spot and exploit sight gags that'd make Wile E. Coyote wince, from whirling blades of decapitation to massive, flapping, milk-filled boobies. Bizarre? You betcha. The real trick is in linking these oddities, which leads to big points and, in competition, the ability to fire on opponents. In a typical scenario, chopping your head off, into lighting yourself on fire, into igniting the giant exploding pumpkin, will vault you up to a rooftop where you can drop into a huge, extruded mouth, which will chew you up and spit you into a bed of spikes, which will link you back to the original blade that sawed off your head...and so it goes. Making it all the more freakish, the characters are lurid even by Spumco standards.

In its current and somewhat unrefined state, the mechanics are in need of some added polish, but the engine is intact and up to the task at hand, running at a comfy 60 fps. The control, while easy to pick up, is hindered by a slight lack of fluidity and animation, but given the context of the game, it's well-suited once you come to grips with the theme park regalia and exactly what the hell you're supposed to do. Luckily, there's an unlimited free-roam option, otherwise the do-over quotient through the timed portions of the game would be worse than sitting through the new *Tom Green* show. The Spumco-powered story bits seemed lacking as well (in style, not substance), registering at Flash-animation levels, although this could be for effect or just indicative of the early build; at this point it's anyone's guess. At the very least, I'm intrigued, if not a little freaked out. **play**

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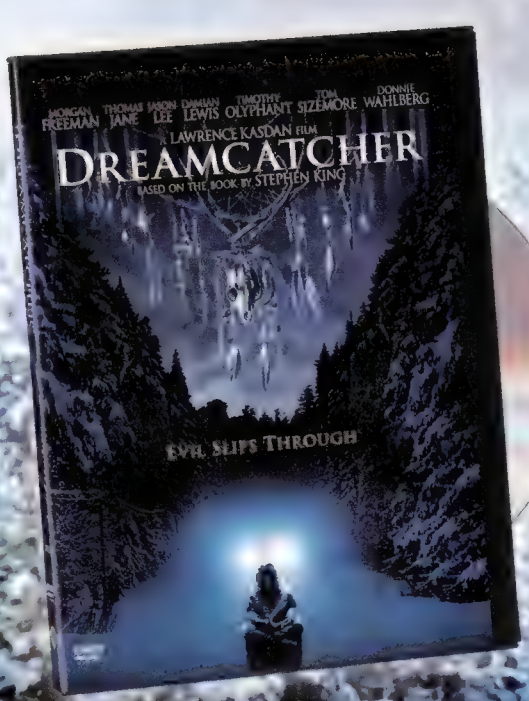
Jeffrey K. Howard, ABC NEWS



"DREAMCATCHER OOZES WITH HORROR."

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Castlevania
Lament of Innocence

The origin of Castlevania looks better every time we see it

words chris hoffman

system: playstation 2
developer: koe tokyo
publisher: konami
available: november

If you read **play**'s August cover story on Castlevania: Lament of Innocence, then you're already aware that Koji "Iga" Igarashi's first attempt to bring Castlevania into the third dimension was looking nothing short of captivating when last we experienced it. Now, mere months from the game's release, KCET continues to add extra layers of polish, refine the visuals, tweak the difficulty, and tie everything together; the results, in a word, are beautiful.

What is most immediately noticeable about Lament of Innocence is the incredible graphical detail at every turn. Light pours through stained glass, casting brilliantly colored patterns on the ground; paintings, tapestries, and stone engravings adorn nearly every wall or floor, almost all of them unique; wood, brick and stone look aged, as if truly part of a lord's castle in the late 11th century. In the Ghostly Theatre area, exquisite decorations such as oriental rugs lend an air of regality, while disheveled furniture adds an authentic touch to the Cathedral of Resonance. Soundwise, the music is on course to live up to Iga's promise of eclipsing that of Symphony of the Night, and both Japanese and English dialogue will be included in the final release.

As impressive as the aesthetics are, it is easy to overlook them in light of Castlevania's action. Exploration, though present, seems to be taking a backseat to the combat, which is both more intense and much deeper than in previous Castlevania games. Most rooms contain a horde of enemies that must be defeated to proceed onward, and Belmont progenitor Leon has both weak and strong whip attacks to annihilate them, as well as a multitude of combos that are learned throughout the game. Although there is no leveling up per se, there are items to increase maximum HP, MP and hearts for special weapons, plus there is equipment to purchase, providing that extra combative edge.

While gameplay, not story, is the focus, a few tidbits have come to light about Leon's quest and subsequent transformation from common knight to legendary vampire killer. One is that Leon's fellow knight, the learned Mathius Cronqvist, appears to be playing a significant role; another is that an evil doppelganger of Leon roams the castle depths.

There is one last aspect of the game that Lament of Innocence introduces to the Castlevania series: fear. Even though the franchise has always been about horror, it has never really attempted to unlock this primal emotion until now. Through the use of unsettling sound effects, disturbing colors, and the immersive thrall the game seems to possess, there are areas in Castlevania primed to elicit true terror. Now that's fun. **play**

Though platforming elements in Lament of Innocence are few, they are excellent when they appear.

"Light pours through stained glass, casting brilliantly colored patterns on the ground; paintings, tapestries, and stone engravings adorn nearly every wall or floor, almost all of them unique."

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EyeToy

Not just a toy; potentially the greatest party game ever

system: playstation 2
developer: london studio
publisher: sony
available: november

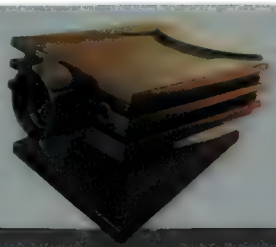
words chris hoffman

I consider myself a hardcore gamer through and through; I grew up on 8-bit, still carry a torch for 2D, and live and breathe games like Final Fantasy, Metroid and Panzer Dragoon. So why is it that I'm so entranced by Sony's EyeToy, clearly aimed at the casual gamer and as far from hardcore as it gets? Three words: innovation, brilliance, fun.

This affordable USB camera is unlike anything I've ever played with before, literally putting me in the game, and very likely revolutionizing gaming as a social experience. The entire process is hands-off; you move your body to control the onscreen action, right down to the menu interface. OK, so it looks ridiculous, and maybe it's a tad like that U-Force and Activator buried in the attic, but opposed to those relics, the EyeToy works and the games are actually fun...especially when friends are around, and even more so after enjoying a few rounds of recreational beverages.

The heart of the EyeToy software is the 12 minigames it comes packed with, but you can also record messages up to 60 seconds long (devours memory card space, though ideal for leaving lewd videos for your roommates) or just zone out on the trippy graphic effects of the Playroom. Hardcore or not, with its $50 price tag and unlimited future potential, the EyeToy could be the niftiest peripheral video gaming has yet seen. **play**

EyeToy camera



Highlights

Twelve minigames make up the bulk of the EyeToy's initial offering. Here are six of the best.

Kung Foo

Kung Foo epitomizes what the EyeToy is all about: simple, wacky fun. Fend off waves of attacking ninjas by punching, chopping, or otherwise smacking the bejesus out of them.

Boogie Down

You knew there had to be a dancing game in the mix, right? In Boogie Down, you have to watch the on-screen grooves of dance-chick QT, then match her arm motions to the same beat.

Mirror Time

Touch the green lights that appear in the corners, don't touch the red lights. Sounds simple...until your image turns upside-down...or flips horizontally...or flips half vertically while the other half stays put.

UFO Juggler

The goal here is to spin UFOs so they launch off the top of the screen, but if you get overzealous, you'll blow them up instead. You also need to contend with enemy attack craft.

Rocket Rumble

You can think of it as an update to Fantavision. As the rockets launch into the sky, you touch them to activate them, then smack the plunger to release beautiful fireworks displays.

Boxing Chump

In one corner: Big Robo Bro. In the other: you. A basic but hilariously cool boxing game, where you play the fighter, punching, dodging, and knocking your opponent into scrap

"So why is it that I'm so entranced by Sony's EyeToy? Three words: innovation, brilliance, fun."

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system xbox
developer 2015
publisher vu games
available q1 2004

Men of Valor: Vietnam

Yet another signal that video gaming is taking a new turn

words tom ham

Men of Valor: Vietnam is a historical first-person shooter set in the relatively untapped horrors of the Vietnam War. Action-packed and cinematic, the game promises to take players places they've rarely been, while portraying the drama and intensity of combat during war, with a focus on relationships developed between squadmates under fire.

While I was watching the demo, it truly felt like I was in the jungles of Vietnam, shooting at an enemy I couldn't see. Bullets were whizzing from speaker to speaker, parts of trees and bamboo were splintering and flying all around, my squadmates were cussing at me for support, my rifle jammed, I could hear the Huey fly overhead—holy crap, what do I do!? Developer 2015 proved they could re-create the excitement and intensity of war with Allied Assault, and now they're doing it again with Men of Valor. "Combat in Men of Valor is very intense," explains John Whitmore, director of development. "The jungle is ideal for full cover and concealment, and soldiers have to know how to use the terrain to their advantage. Our programmers have created a combat system where it takes into account movement speed, posture and recoil to calculate how accurate a shot is going to be. We're also stressing the importance of spotting and selecting the best vantage point on the battlefield."

Men of Valor: Vietnam will have one campaign starting with the major American ground force commitments in 1965 and continuing through the Tet Offensive of 1968. "We've done extensive research for Men of Valor," says Whitmore. "Every single mission is based on an actual historical event. We wanted to give the player a contextual and cinematic experience so the storyline, supporting characters and the various situations are carried over from mission to mission."

A cool aspect of the game is the main character's race. You play Dean Shepard, private with the USMC, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines who is African-American. This is something that 2015 feels strongly about. "African-Americans fought alongside whites as putative equals in Vietnam, and a lot of the accounts we were reading stressed how relationships developed between people of different backgrounds during the war," explains Whitmore. "America in the mid '60s was a very different place in terms of attitudes about equality and integration, and a lot of troops sent over had never had a real conversation with members of another race until they were thrown together in battle. A lot of negative attitudes persisted once the troops arrived in country, but once under enemy fire, nobody had time to worry about the color of the guy who was watching his back. This was a part of the war we knew we wanted to portray because of its historical importance, and the game from the beginning included several African-American characters. In addition, the game makes use of licensed music from the period, and when we approached representatives of some of the artists, they asked if we had any positive black characters in the game. We replied that we did, and they asked if the main character was black. At that time, we hadn't given too much thought to the issue, but that question forced us to take a step back and ask, why not? The color of the player's skin doesn't really make a difference in gameplay, but when we thought about the story we could develop around an African-American main character, we found that it provided a lot of opportunities to touch upon the dramatic themes we wanted to investigate in the game. We started reading more accounts of the African-American experience during the war and eventually decided that a black main character would add a lot to the game experience. We didn't really think much about the uniqueness of it at the time, but a lot of people noticed it at E3 and were surprised. We're glad that people are coming to see that as a positive differentiating feature of the title."

2015 is no stranger to multiplayer gaming and Men of Valor will have all the necessary components so players can show their prowess online. There will be split-screen, system link and full Xbox Live support. There will aslo be Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch and unique team-based game types such as Search and Destroy. Players will also be able to re-fight episodes of the Vietnam War as well, from sabotage raids on the airbase at Da Nang to the attack on the American Embassy in Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive. All the evidence so far tells shows that this game is going to rock. **play**

"Every single mission is based on an actual historical event."

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I-Ninja

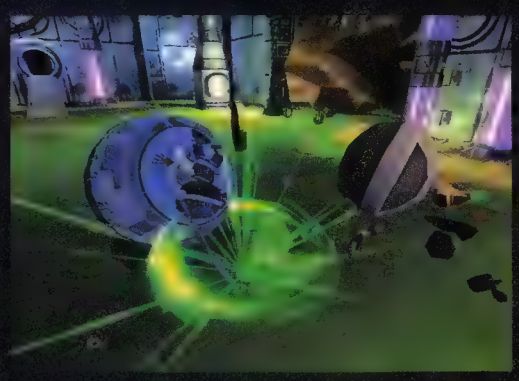
Pint-sized power that lasts for hours, an interview with team I-Ninja...

system ps2, gc, xbox
developer argonaut
publisher namco
available november

words dave halverson

Quite possibly the purest, most polished and innovative platformer of this year (or any other for that matter) is Namco's I-Ninja. Developed by Argonaut—home of the original Star Fox, Buck Bumble (need a sequel please), Croc, Red Dog and the missing Malice (among others)—I-Ninja takes an amalgam of play mechanics and fashions them into an extremely engaging game that somehow exhibits the graphical integrity of a first-party Sony game from the likes of Naughty Dog or Insomniac.

There's much more to this pint-sized ninja master than meets the eye. He can execute extreme actions like grinding and lip tricks, run on walls both vertically and horizontally, affix himself to anything that rolls (shades of Marble Madness) chain-grapple around vertical tracks and over chasms, fight like a ninja with a Starbucks fixation, and when the job is done, hop into the cockpit of a massive mech for some Goemon-style giant-robot pummeling! We caught up with Namco's Jon Kromrey (producer) and Argonaut's Jamie Walker (producer), Seb Canniff (producer) and Dax Ginn (lead designer) for the lowdown on their latest platformer—which actually is coming out!



play: First, because we did a cover, please, tell us what has become of Malice for Xbox...or at least assure us that it's coming.
It is coming soon to Xbox and PS2.

Onto I-Ninja! I assume this is a fresh engine since it's the first time we've seen an independent studio produce this level of visual integrity.
Yes, I-Ninja uses a new cross-platform engine that has been in development for some years now. Argonaut has had a highly skilled team of engine coders developing this and we are very pleased with the results.

What had this particular team worked on prior to I-Ninja?
Most of the team recently worked on the first two Harry Potter Games for PlayStation, and then a string of other titles that would be longer than this article. We have some very experienced people on the team that have been in the industry since it started.

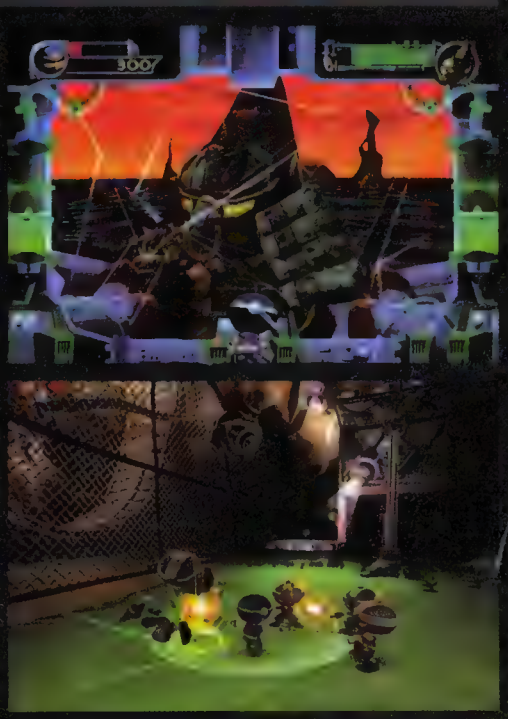
The game feels very much like a Namco product. Did they conceive the game and bring it to you or did you conceive it and shop it around?
No, this is Argonaut's IP, developed in-house. We have benefited a lot from our close working relationship with Namco though; there are definitely Namco-isms that have ended up in the final design. They have a very good knowledge of game mechanics and technical issues and we have benefited from working with Jon and his team.

How did you arrive at a cartoon ninja that performs extreme stunts, pilots giant robots and mounts giant rolling spheres? Is this a single individual's vision or did it evolve somewhat through the development process?
It has been a constant evolution. The main features of I-Ninja have remained the same, but we have slowly and carefully developed them and added some more as time has gone by. We all love the Tony Hawk series of games and who can't love rolling around on giant spheres? The whole team and Namco have added to the development of the game. This is a time-consuming process as we need to constantly make sure things fit together in a sensible way and make sure that there is an overall style and quality level for all our game elements, but we feel the results are worth the effort.

You've incorporated some spectacular play mechanics, like the Marble Madness stuff and Goemon-style giant robot battles that will really draw the enthusiast gamers. Would you say this is a platformer with a pure vision, aimed at being a great game first and a marketing vehicle second?
Very much so. We all love playing games, so we set out to make something we would love to play first. That's not to say we are immune to marketing forces; you can't bury your head in the sand and pretend the customers aren't important. They are the most important people in the whole industry; if no one buys our games, then none of us will have a job! If there is a strong case for changing something due to marketing then we would do it, but luckily we haven't had any such feedback and the game is what we want it to be, namely fun to play.

These days, in a saturated market driven by me-too sequels and licensing, what do you feel is key in launching a brand with as much potential as I-Ninja? You've certainly done your part!
We think you have already touched on what is key and that is making a game for gamers, a game that players actually like, not following some marketing formula, or jumping on whatever bandwagon seems to be passing that year. We also have a good sense of humor and irony and aren't afraid to change things we don't like, no matter what the cost. If we had to pick one single thing that is most important, we would say feeling the satisfaction when you see someone enjoy playing the game you've made.

"We also have a good sense of humor and irony and aren't afraid to change things we don't like, no matter what the cost."



Ninja lays the smack down on some would-be mecha ninja assassins.

You're able to put up richly detailed, big environments, incredibly lit and full of characters and animation and spin them at 60 fps—on PS2. Is this the product of experience? New tools? Dual processing? What's the secret behind this game's prowess?
It's a bit of everything really: Argonaut has great coders, artists, character modelers, animators and designers who all work closely together to make this possible, and Namco to give their two cents as well. Rather than throw all our engine power into one area, we try to balance the way we use the engine across every aspect of the game, so everything looks and plays well, rather than having, say, amazingly high poly and multi-boned characters that can only ever be drawn in a tiny room. We all have a load of PSOne experience; here we learned many tricks to get the best look and feel to a game whilst using the cheapest methods available (engine-wise).

I have to say the Marble Madness bits feel great. It's not often that you find a mechanic that relies on physics so rewarding without being frustrating. There's quite a bit of it early on. Does it continue throughout the game?
Yes, there is more later on in the game. It's an awesome mechanic and everyone who picks it up immediately gets it and thinks it's great, so we have built more mini-games around it as well as doing a few variations where Ninja is running on top rather than hanging onto the side, which is a sweet variation.

How big is I-Ninja? Is it a game people will beat in a day or savor all week? Have you built any features to encourage a second pass?
We have built in many different features to encourage replay. We've added in more enemies, unlock-able mini-games, multiple sword upgrades, a battle arena, and various cheats. You also need to replay some of the levels but with a different objective the second time round: kill all the enemies, find all the special pickups, or complete the level in a certain time. We don't think anyone will get bored, and we challenge anyone to get 100 percent in less than a week.

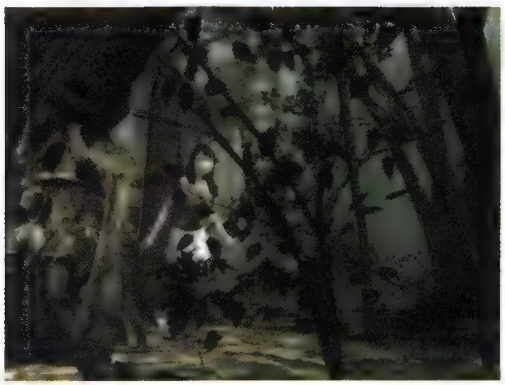
Well, it's a spectacular effort. What are you most proud of about I-Ninja and what would you say to our readers so they believe my unbridled enthusiasm is well-founded?
We are most proud of Ninja himself. It feels great just to run him around a level, running on walls, jumping, fighting in the air, grinding, chain swinging, power-chaining, sword-hovering and kick-jumping. He's a cool character in both feel and attitude, and that was always our target. We think we have hit it and we hope the gaming public agrees. **play**

Fatal Frame 2
Crimson Butterfly

Enter a terror asylum of the mind.

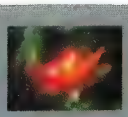
words brady fiechter

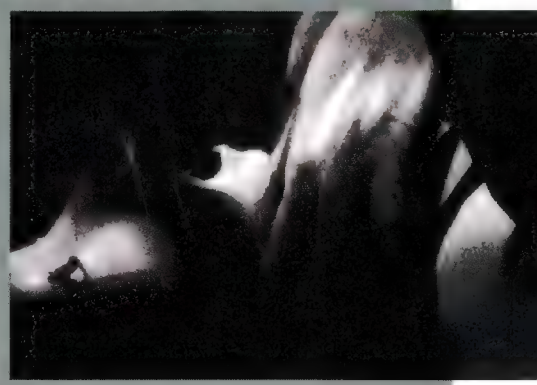
system: playstation 2
developer: tecmo
publisher: tecmo
available: october



"The imagery in FF2 is at once creepy and gorgeous; this one must be experienced by horror fans."

"Finding delicacy within the horror is what makes Fatal Frame 2 such a delirious treat."





Things that go bump in the night are the source of our greatest fears. Not knowing what's causing those bumps, never quite seeing the full shape of the source, is true terror. Fatal Frame 2 feeds off this powerful truth, knowingly taking us into a haunted house of the psyche. The imagery in the game is chilling. The way the ghosts show their form, materializing from the shadows with a wicked grace, could almost be called beautiful if not for the intense creepiness. This game is wildly inspired.

Finding delicacy within the horror is what makes Fatal Frame 2 such a delirious treat the moment you enter its world. High praise must go to the artists behind the visions. Ditto to the designers who offer originality in a genre that still has a long way to go before reaching the possibilities of true fright. Like the first game, which remains a relatively unknown achievement, the main weapon to fight the spirits is an antique camera. Somehow it possess the ability to imprison the spirit within the frame of a picture; the closer the ghost is to the photographer, the more acute its power.

Snapping the shots in Fatal Frame 2 are inseparable twin sisters Mio and Mayu, lost in the woods of some mysterious village. The girls experience flashbacks and premonitions, revealing a plot of human sacrifice. They must stay together throughout the journey, otherwise death will consume them. Turn the camera on one of them, and you'll see an effigy of a swarm of hands reaching to pull them into an abyss of darkness. Every step in this game seems to pack a mood of unease, where sound, the seen and the unseen intertwine; flashes of disturbing images come at just the right time, relying on building tension and the anticipation of the imagination constantly being toyed with.

Producer Keisuke Kikuchi watched a group of us playing the game, noting our reactions, promising to take the game into even creepier territory, speaking of the power of a child's mind to believe in the spirit world; he says some of them truly do believe in ghosts, claim to even have experienced their presence. Now that's inspiration. **play**

Ratchet & Clank
Going Commando

A bold attempt to redefine a genre

words brady fiechter

system: playstation 2
developer: insomniac games
publisher: sony
available: november

"We're always rebuilding, figuring out better ways to do things."

play: We were talking about sequels before. Obviously the first game was very successful and you had the unusual success in Japan, and you said it was the most satisfying project in the nine years of the company. So when you're sitting down and preparing for something new, was there ever the temptation to say, "Ok, we're just gonna let it rest for now and go on with something new"?
Ted Price: To start a new franchise takes so much effort and so much stress. When you have something that has already established a good gameplay base and a good set of characters, it is better for us, from a business perspective and an emotional perspective, to work with that franchise, until we feel that we've really tapped it out. I think the great thing about the Ratchet and Clank universe is that it's so expansive. There's so many things we can do with Ratchet. There are so many places we can create in this very open-ended science fiction universe; everyone's so very excited about what we can do with both Ratchet and Clank, and with any other character we happen to create. I think with Spyro we felt the same way when we were doing Ripto's Rage and Year of the Dragon. There were so many things we wanted to do with Spyro that it didn't make sense to go off in a different direction. We wanted to keep the high energy level and really do something different with each game. So with Going Commando, we have that high energy level, we have an opportunity to take the platform genre even further away from what people expect. And why not do it?

For a sequel, you can obviously rest, add a few things here, a few things there, and call it a day. But you guys seem to really want to press yourselves and, like you said, really restructure this game. A sequel certainly has a different set of stress.
Well, you're right. The stress comes with trying to come up with facets of the game that are going to be unique to the genre and to the franchise. The second form of stress is in reduced development time. So not only do we feel the pressure to make the game different from the first—and significantly different, because that's always been our goal for our sequels—but we also feel the pressure to get it out quickly. And these are often pressures we place on ourselves. We create the pressure because we don't want consumers to forget about who Ratchet and Clank are. After they finish the first game, we want them to have something that's immediately accessible and brand new, even more exciting... But that adventure has got to be really new, it's gotta feel fresh. It can't just be a rehash of the first one.

Like we talked about at lunch, you guys must obviously really love what you do. It's insane that you finished the project in eight months.
Well, the people here are really motivated, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute. Because Ratchet is so open-ended as a character, and the universe is so open-ended...it's easier to [deliver] new stuff, and the first thing you want to do when you come up with new stuff is try it out, see it onscreen. So doing a sequel gives the opportunity to start experimenting again. For us, it's like making a new game all the time, even though it is a sequel. The nice thing is we have the security of working within a known universe. We don't have to worry about if people will like the character or like the whole idea of this platformer with RPG elements. We've already established that, so now we can push it, really keep pushing the boundaries out, working on top of this base we've already created.

What have been some of the biggest frustrations?
That's a good question [pause]. I wouldn't say there have been really any frustrations. I'd say we've gone through some growing pains. Because the team has gotten larger. The game is significantly larger. And we're just doing more stuff in the game. So the challenge that we faced was trying to create many different types of gameplay within the game but create them with the same level of polish that we did with Ratchet and Clank and all our other games. And so with the smaller amount of time, making sure the game adheres to the same quality levels with so much more stuff has been really difficult but also rewarding, once we realized we could do it. And that took a bigger team, and with a bigger team you've got structure issues. And how do we organize the company better and make the whole process efficient? Those are challenges we face every single day.

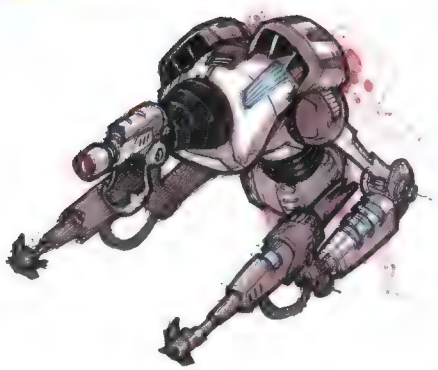
And one thing that's so unique about your process is that you do involve everybody from the ground up.
Yeah. Everybody has the opportunity to create, to generate ideas to other areas they aren't necessarily heavily involved in. And that's what makes a game like this so varied. There's no way that one person could come up with all the ideas in the game. And I think that's kind of the philosophy that most developers are adopting. You don't have one lead designer who is responsible for saying, "This is exactly what happens at every part of the game." You are relying on a whole group of very creative people to work together to come up with really interesting parts that form a much greater whole. That's been our philosophy from the beginning, and I know I've driven that into the ground.

But it's important.
It makes it fun to come to work. The best example I can come up with is when an environment artist gets a map and a set of production design drawings. They've probably been in the meetings where we've discussed the level and they've been able to contribute to what the level's going to be. When it's time to build that level, they still have an incredible amount of creative freedom to interpret the map and the drawings the way that they see fit. That not only creates a lot of variety, but it makes everybody feel like they have a lot of ownership over every aspect of the game. So that's not just the environment artist; there's the sound engineers, the gameplay programmers, you name it—everybody gets to feel that sense of creative freedom.

Working within this genre, where do you see it going? Do you see improvements needing to be made—maybe improvements that can't occur until the next round of technology?
I think the genre's on the threshold of transforming into something completely different. I think we're going to see fewer and fewer traditional platformers, because so many different games are taking so many different routes. We're taking the RPG route. Jak II is going with a more open-ended Grand Theft Auto route. Prince of Persia is another example of trying to do something entirely different within the genre. What's really great about all these games is that they're revitalizing the interest in the category. And we don't have many traditional platformers popping up any more. I think consumers have moved away from that. They want more, they want something different. We, as developers of platform games, have to respond to that and decide what the genre is ultimately going to be... To me, it kinda seems like the platform genre is on the verge of exploding into a lot of subgenres, and we're seeing a lot of evidence of this already this year. I think we helped start this last year, with the way Ratchet and Clank moved away from stuff. Now a lot of other games are doing it. And it's great. Good for the genre. Good for the consumer. Good for the industry.

You're definitely right in that consumer tastes do change, which dictates the style of where you go. You have to go with the times, with the people's taste. We're all growing up together, playing the same stuff. In a lot of ways, you still have the same audience. How much influence does the consumer have on your thoughts when you're making the game? Some designers say, "I make it for me. I hope they like it, but I'm making what I want." Where's the balance?
There's definitely a balance you have to strike. And since we are all are game consumers, it's hard to separate our

Much more attention has been paid to lighting effects; you gotta love the mini nukes.



likes and dislikes from the mass market, because there are plenty of us who consider ourselves part of the mass market. We first and foremost come up with ideas for games we want to play. It's important to create the energy and excitement behind an idea before you make it a reality. There's no way you can walk into a genre where nobody's particular excited about making the game, because then we make a piece of junk. In fact, we've already made that misstep once, where we tried to move into a genre where we weren't really clear or sure whether we should be in that genre. Now the philosophy is to come up with an idea that really excites you, make sure it works for the target audience that's coming up in the next couple years, and then do it. And keep an eye on where the target audience is moving. Ratchet and Clank: Going Commando is a great example of this. We love platformers. We love creating games that have platform elements, but we saw the market moving away from traditional platformers. So we decided to put the RPG elements in. With Going Commando, it has a lot more RPG elements in it, with the whole character progression, the whole experience system, the more hardcore elements; we're responding to a shift in the demographic right now, where players are demanding more sophistication in their games. So Ratchet and Clank: Going Commando is a response to that. The cool thing is, it's still the kind of game we love to make. Everything about it excites all of us. It's not like we had to take a step into hardcore RPG or, say, the Metal Gear Solid approach, to really satisfy the audience. That wouldn't have been good for the team. We were able to take the elements from other genres and blend them in to what we wanted to do. And now we're happy, and hopefully consumers are happy as well.

I really look at the RPG elements as what truly separates this game from the original, what makes it a dramatic sequel.
Absolutely. The character growth system is what really makes this game feel very different for me than the first game. On a visceral sense, the way the weapons work and the addition of space combat and the mega games may be what other people [point to], because they're very different and are definitely new additions to the franchise. But at the very core, our goal was to change the way the character worked in platformers. Period. We hadn't seen any other characters that had the ability to grow in a platformer. So that was our goal with this game. If people recognize that, fantastic. If they don't, they should still have plenty of fun with the game. They may not even realize they gained 80 hit points by the end of the game. So what? If they've had a good time, we don't care.

Were the RPG parts the very first thing you wanted to implement for the sequel?
That was the first thing we discussed. That was the biggest issue for us. Before, you brought up risk. And yeah, this was big risk for us. We weren't sure if the audience would get this. Now, after having four focus tests with at least 200 people total playing the game, we now are very confident that this will work, and that people get it, and people like it.

You could have very easily alienated the original audience, or maybe gone too far away from what made the first game so successful. You could have ended up with an entirely different game.
Absolutely. We did toy with the idea of going even deeper with stats and hit points displayed over characters' heads, things like that. Things you would find in a really hardcore RPG. But then we took a step back and realized that you don't need that. It's not necessary in a game like this. We evaluated stuff like that and decided not to go full-on PC RPG.

"I think the genre's on the threshold of transforming into something completely different."

It's interesting to hear you say that. Myself, as the consumer, would have been disappointed had you gone with that choice. But you obviously thought about it and very well could have.
That's why we have the discussions; that's why we have the pre-production phase. What's kind of cool about Insomniac is that most of the decisions we make end up being easy decisions. It's a group of professionals, a group of gamers who have been playing games since their youth, so a lot of the opinions people have are really well informed. So if we have a consensus on any particular topic, it's generally going to work out.

You said the game is huge. Almost too big.
Yeah, it's been a challenge for us to get everything done. One of the concerns we have as a developer is that consumers won't see everything. We're spending so much time polishing every little corner of the game, you wonder sometimes, will people actually go through and do the replay, will they go through the second time and see the stuff they wouldn't at first? Because we're making special stuff you will only see if you play through the second time. So should we devote the time to do that? The answer is always "yes," but it's still a tough decision.

And you have to do it for you. The joy of making the game.
It's that pride of craftsmanship. All of us really want to create something that people can play over and over again and look back on years later and say, "Wow, that was a great experience because it felt so polished. They really put 110 percent into it." You asked where some of the stress comes from. That's probably where most of it comes from: wanting to make everything polished.

Is there a competitive nature there a bit too?
Yeah, but that's not a big factor for us. It's more about our sense of satisfaction, our sense of pride. In seeing people holding this game in their hands and telling their friends about it. It's not about, are we going to be better than Jak or Prince of Persia, or whatever; it's, did we really put something out that reflects our desire for AAA quality?

Is there anything you'd like to see change in the industry?
There's room for improvement in a lot of areas. I think new mediums for the delivery of games would really help. Because now you've got consoles that all have hard drives, or at least that are coming—and who knows what's coming with the next wave of hardware—but, man, it would be nice, as a consumer, to get games immediately. And I know that the Phantom is coming out, so there are some early answers for this, but with wireless technology... I mean, as a consumer, when I want a game, I want it now.

There's something so gratifying about wielding a flamethrower.

You've been fortunate to have a unique position of sharing technology with Naughty Dog.
That's another good point. Technology sharing is a big, big plus, and something a lot of people are already taking advantage of, besides just us. Look at all the people who are using the Unreal engine. It's now becoming the norm to use somebody else's engine or work with somebody to create an engine. If we get bogged down by technology, and struggling to come to grips with brand new technology every six years, it takes our focus away from making great games. We can't focus on the design and making the games truly fun. Because that really should be at the core of what we're doing. We can't get distracted. By having the ability to mitigate the risk on the technology side, it gives us the freedom to do stuff on the creative side.

But is it unrealistic? Will people really have this opportunity as much as might be necessary?
Yeah, and I think that this industry is small enough and friendly enough to make it possible. We all are competitors, but most of the guys I know who run the other companies—they're really good guys, we're all friends, and we all recognize that there's strength in numbers.

Let's talk a bit about story. There's a lot more storytelling going on in Going Commando?
Actually, not really. We have about the same amount of cinematics as before. We just measured it the other day: there's about 60 minutes. What's different about Ratchet and Clank: Going Commando is that there are more twists. And that's why we haven't been as forthcoming on the story as we were with Ratchet and Clank. It's a more complicated story, and the characters aren't who you think they are. That's about all I can say, because I don't want to destroy the experience.

Do you think every game should have story in it?
I don't think it's necessary. I think that depends on the genre. If you're talking about the platformer or first-person shooter or adventure genre, it really helps draw the player in for sure. You want to care for the main character, right? You need a reason to identify with them.

A lot of developers comment that we still struggle getting the balance just right. I love and want storytelling in my game. I want even more. But there are some games that I really had a problem with. I know a lot of people loved Metal Gear Solid 2, but I felt the pacing was all wrong, and I just couldn't get into the flow of the game. It has to be structured in a way to keep the player connected to the game part.
That is one of the most difficult challenges we faced, because you don't know how people are going to react to your cutscenes. You don't know if they're going to get the humor. So we have to be very careful not to overdo it or underdo it. Without enough story, it just feels like you're destroying levels. We found this in the first focus test we held; we didn't have any of the cutscenes in, and the players rated the game far worse than they did once we put the cutscenes in. It was off the charts once we put the story in. And that's just because players could put each of these worlds in context. They felt like they were actually accomplishing something. Which is another good example of why it was important for us to create a story-driven game. Unlike Spyro, where you were just trying to collect everything, in Ratchet and Clank, you are trying to resolve the story. There is no global collectible; you collect bolts, but you use those for money. You're not trying to get 100 widgets. We want you to care for the characters.

What do you think about the idea of linearity in a game? With GTA, there was the new way of looking at open-ended gameplay. This is fine, but I still desire structure. I want you to tell me what to do.
I think it's helpful for players to have an idea of what they should be doing. Nobody likes to be led by the nose, but we try to balance it so that you have an idea of what your next objective should be, but we're not going to tell you how to do it. Again, this is something we've been experimenting with over the years, how to make the player feel like he's in control, but has some guidance. The story helps with that, having missions and objectives helps with that, the way we use maps helps. So you're never lost, you don't feel like you have to bang your head against the wall in frustration. As far as linearity goes, I think it's pretty important in games. There are certainly areas in Ratchet and Clank that are not linear, and we have some big exploration levels where you can go out and find different things. Certainly there are many parts of the game where you are opening up multiple levels, and you have a choice where to go. But in the end, it's still a linear story, and you're moving in a specific direction, you're moving forward constantly throughout the game. Personally, that's more satisfying for me; I agree with you on that one.

Making a game like this, any game for that matter, must be an amazingly demanding, yet rewarding, process.
Well, that's one of the reasons having a bigger company helps. There are a lot of people here who have been making games for a very long time. Everybody has a pretty good idea of what it takes, and everybody brings different concerns, has a good idea of what to look out for, and what kind of things can drop through the cracks. When we work together, we end up with a pretty amazing game. If it was up to one person to try and determine how everything works, down to the last detail, it would never get done.

That collective energy must be so important.
This industry is a team industry. You gotta have good teams. And that's something that's quite different from film, the recognition. I think in the movie industry, a lot of the credit goes to the directors, or the stars. It's not quite as obvious that that's a team effort. In our industry, we have so fewer obvious stars. The last, say, 10 years ago, you had a few really bright lights, and they received a lot of credit. And the credit was due; the games were smaller. But now it's getting tougher and tougher to isolate one person who is responsible for a game. It's now all about recognizing the teams. And I think that's how it should be. As we grow, the teams are going to get bigger, and it's going to be less incumbent on one person to actually get the games done.

You guys learned a lot during the six months you worked on I5 before deciding to scrap it for Ratchet. You must be constantly taking lessons away from what you do.
That's one of the best things about this industry: it's still new enough that you can always learn new things. Because we have new technology coming in all the time, we can come up with new systems. We may have created a system for, say, our tools that were awesome on PlayStation One. But with PS2, everything changed, so we got to create a brand-new system that was even more robust. That's fun. The whole building process for me is really exciting. We're always rebuilding, figuring out better ways to do things.

You seem to always be dreaming forward. Like we talked about at lunch, holding out for the day when we have truly virtual worlds.
Oh yeah. I mean, I'm such a geek. I love the technology. I love the idea that in 10 years, everything we know about this industry is going to be completely transformed, which is so much fun to think about. At Insomniac, we're always on the leading edge of technology, so I know that we will be there on the leading edge in 10 years. And we'll have the opportunity to do the really, really cool stuff—or at least the stuff that seems cool now. And that's exciting to me. **play**

"I love the technology. I love the idea that in 10 years, everything we know about this industry is going to be completely transformed."

Manhunt

Not rated "E" for everyone

words tom ham

system: playstation 2
developer: rockstar north
publisher: rockstar games
available: october

The Grand Theft Auto games have become not just a video game series but a true phenomenon. Love it or not, Rockstar Games has penetrated the mainstream and changed the course of game development. And you know what? They're going to do it again with their latest concoction, Manhunt.

In a word, Manhunt is evil. Fiendish by design and executed with the edginess and over-the-top violence that only Rockstar can deliver, Manhunt is a game that goes deep within our own psyche and brings out the common thread among all of us. The inner animal. The need to stay alive. What would you do if thrown into a brutal environment and left to your own devices? How would you fight to go on? Welcome to the world of Manhunt, where survival is the name of the game.

"We drew from many different mediums, from movies like *Seven* and *Jacob's Ladder* to books like *Paradise Lost* and even *Alice in Wonderland*," explained Rockstar. "We didn't want to make just a stealth action game; we wanted to create the ultimate in survival horror as well. We're giving the players three options in this game. You can run, hide or fight. It's up to you how you want to play it." After watching a brief demo of the game, I'm still in shock.

You play James Earl Cash, hardened criminal and death row inmate who has been sentenced to death by lethal injection. In a strange twist of fate, Cash is given a second chance at life. He awakens, completely unarmed, in Carcer City, a man-made ghetto ghost town. Enter the Director. Having skillfully staged Cash's death, he has created the ultimate game of cat and mouse where Cash is the main attraction. The only contact Cash has with the Director is through an earpiece, via which he gets instructions on what he needs to do next. The object of the game is simple—survive through the various "scenes" the Director puts you in. And if you manage to survive until the end, you may just find out who this Director character is. And to make things interesting, the Director has invited a few warm and

> "We didn't want to make just a stealth action game; we wanted to create the ultimate in survival horror as well."

fuzzies to the party. Called Hunters, these psychotic gang members' only objective is to find and kill you. And lastly, giving the game the added "WTF?" vibe is the inclusion of video surveillance cameras spread across Carcer City. You see, the Director is watching your every move and gets off on how violent you dispose of these Hunters. Sure, it sounds perverse and completely whacked, but it may be brilliant at the same time.

Played from a third-person perspective, at its heart, Manhunt is a stealth action game. Much like Metal Gear and Splinter Cell, your definitive goal is the same: stay out of sight. And just like in those games, Cash will use his environment to keep him hidden, i.e. hiding in dark corners, underneath stairways, etc. But that's where the similarities end. In the past, players were able to progress by using simple distractions, tranquilizer darts and, if push came to shove, lethal force. But in Manhunt, the force is much more brutal.

Though Cash isn't armed from the start, he does have access to radar. Much like the radar used in Metal Gear Solid, it shows Cash where the Hunters are in relation to him. However, instead of having the radar pick up visuals per se (like in Metal Gear), the radar here only picks up sounds. So you'll see the enemy when he's walking and talking, but when an enemy stops moving, he disappears on your radar. So now players have to be careful not to make too much noise while in Carcer City. "We want the playing experience to be incredibly tense," continued Rockstar. "We've created a unique AI system where the Hunters will actually listen for you and hone in on your position." I'm already stressing about it and the game isn't even out yet.

In addition to the radar, Cash will have some weapons to aid him in disposing of the Hunters—all for the Director's enjoyment. There will be four classes of weapons in Manhunt (and approximately 20 weapons total in the game), but Cash can only hold three weapons at a time—one on his back, one on his belt and another stored in his pocket. These weapons are usually single-use weapons, but Cash will be able to collect ammo from dead Hunters. What gives Manhunt that extra level of "holy crap!" over any other game is the types of weapons in the game and how they are used. Here are just a few examples:

Single Use Weapon: The Plastic Bag—Once used for carrying groceries and movie rentals from Blockbuster, it is the perfect tool to suffocate and silence an unsuspecting Hunter. You will actually hear your victim gasping for breath.

Medium Weapon: Crowbar—Sure, you can use it to change your tire, but it's much more effective when you hit a Hunter over the head with it.

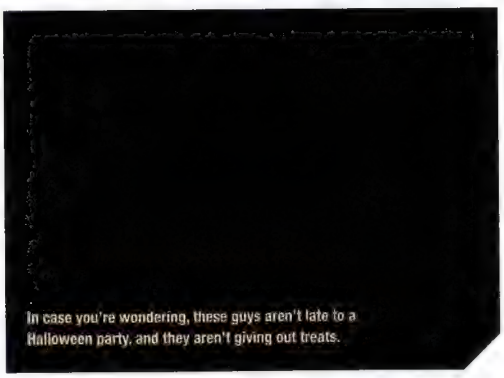
Long Weapons: Baseball Bat—All-time favorite weapon of choice. You will never forget the first time you hear the "ping" of wood against someone's skull.

Other weapons include a pump-action shotgun, cleavers, blackjacks and even glass shards.

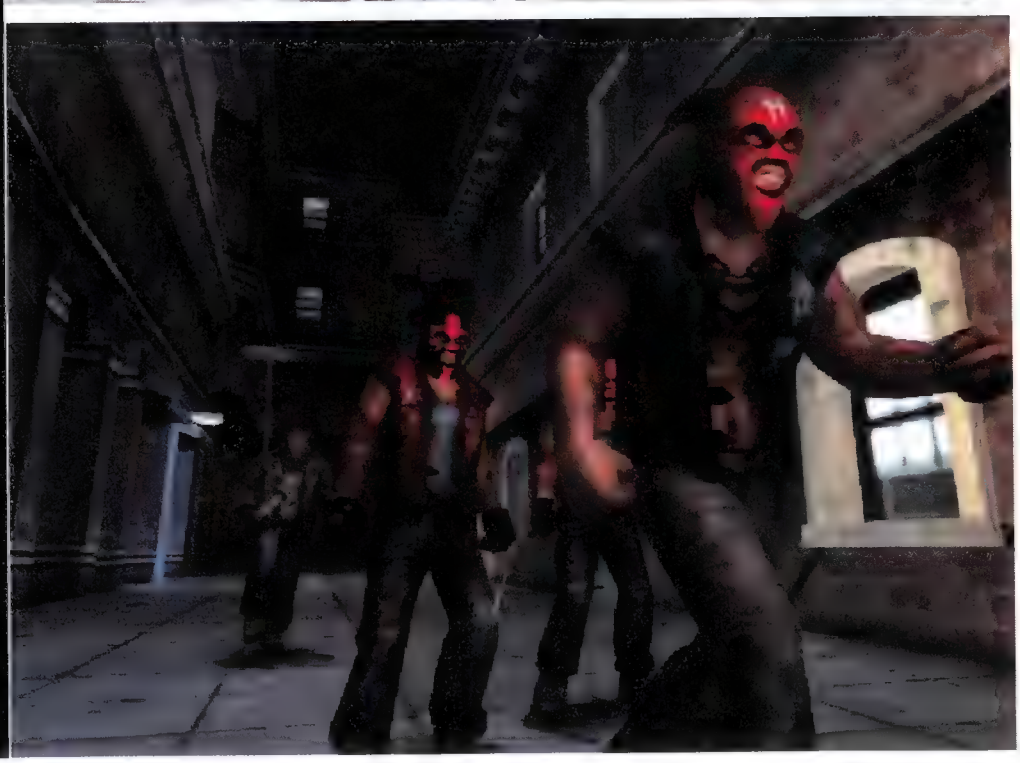
What's truly unsettling about Manhunt is the fact you are essentially performing for the Director. When Cash is about to kill a Hunter, the perspective changes from the third-person to a B-movie view from the Director's chair. Depending on how long it takes to kill a Hunter or which weapon Cash used, players will see a different cutscene of the attack. For example, when using a plastic bag, one cutscene showed Cash suffocating the Hunter till he stopped moving. Another cutscene had him covering the Hunter's head with the plastic bag then snapping his neck. Each weapon will have three unique cutscenes associated with them. Don't try these at home.

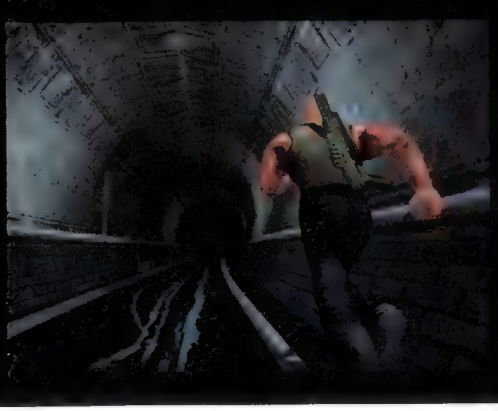
From a visual perspective, Manhunt is probably the best-looking console game Rockstar has put out. Those who have criticized Renderware's capabilities in the past will have newfound respect after checking out Manhunt. Textures are incredibly rich and the use of weather effects and fog is exceptional. The Hunters are especially disturbing. I haven't seen such a wicked assortment of enemies like this in a long time. I can't forget how chilling the various death and murder animations look. Just wait till you see a Hunter's neck snap after you crush him with a baseball bat.

Without question, Rockstar is going further than ever with Manhunt. They have taken a familiar genre and completely turned it upside down, creating a game that is truly their own. Sure it's violent, but if any company in the industry knows how to handle these types of themes and games, it's Rockstar. **play**



In case you're wondering, these guys aren't late to a Halloween party, and they aren't giving out treats.





The JuJu is you

Tak And The Power of JuJu

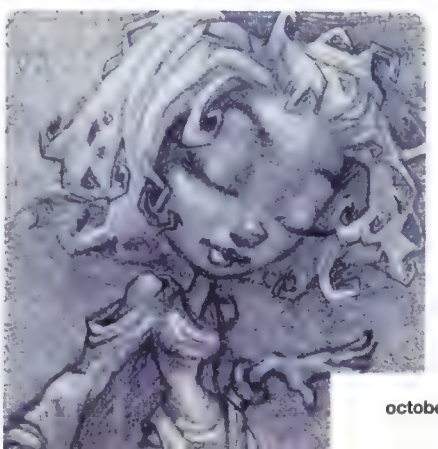
words dave halverson

system ps2, gamecube
developer avalanche software
publisher thq
available october

While I harp away about the industry becoming too mainstream, the quirky platformers I so vehemently defend keep pouring in like late- night infomercials. Sure, these games were started two years ago, and if they don't sell, the funeral dirge may commence, but for now, I'm thinking "stay of execution." For this issue alone, I'm playing I-Ninja, The Hobbit, Jak II, Voodoo Vince, Viewtiful Joe and this lovely bit of prehistoric goodness, Tak and the Power of Juju...while Sonic Heroes, Malice, Tork and more lay in wait. That said, Tak is not a game I expected to celebrate. I'd hoped for a good Bonk-style 3D romp, but what I've found is near Neanderthal euphoria; Joe & Mac and Bonk, beware.

From the outset, you know you're in for something special, or at least different, as the shaman of the Pupununu people, the misshapen, light-bulb-headed Jibolba, notices he's finally contacted a great Juju Spirit...you. "That power stick you hold! Those clothes...and what is this magic box you watch me on? It is obviously the most important thing in your hut..." Impeccably rendered and animated, he's addressing you, hands pressed up against the screen, pleading for your help. Seeking revenge after being passed over for head shaman, Jibolba's nemesis Thaloc has (as prophesied!) conjured up some wicked Juju, turned all of the Pupununu people into sheep, and then crept into the moon temple and stolen the sacred moon stones—the source of power for the Pupununu's protector, the beautiful Moon Juju. Defenseless, Jibolba fears the worst, and hence summons you to his side to help administer the bad-guy antidote—the mighty warrior he trained from birth for this fateful day, Lok. When Tak (sent to fetch him) returns with the recipe for a sweater rather than destruction, Jibolba has no choice but to send him (the polar opposite of a brave warrior) out into the wild. Lead by the Moon Juju's apprentice, Flora, Tak sets out to gather the necessary flowers Jibolba needs to turn Lok back into a brute so he can pound Thaloc and save the day.

Thus begins the journey, initially hinging on exploration and pummeling the native beasts, before segueing into a sprawling non-linear quest wrought with platforming most glorious and personality to burn. While Tak employs pretty much everything I look for in a traditional-hub based epic, what sets it apart, aside from the stellar visuals, is the way Tak interacts with the indigenous wildlife. As a habit, I whack pretty much any critter I see in a world, enemy or not, just to see what happens, but in Tak they hit

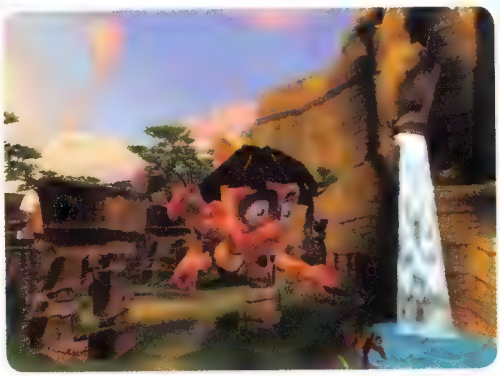


"You haven't lived until you've taken the chicken balloon to Chicken Island."

back. All of the animals in the game are, well, in the game. Rams need to be baited with food to allow Tak passage; orangutans use banana trees as convenient catapults; sheep can be carried overhead to creep by unsuspecting guards; Tak can ride rhinos and take to the skies in a chicken suit. Speaking of fowl, the bar has finally been raised for the mainstay critters of gaming kind—in-game poultry. You haven't lived until you've taken the chicken balloon to Chicken Island—a hardboiled good time for one and all.

It's a wonder the game moves at all given the complexity and size of the environments. Dense vegetation has collision and folds at the touch, the water (and especially waterfalls) is superb—from dunk to splash to mist—and the scrolling skies are colored in blissful hues. The real eye-candy, though, lies in the sweetness of the textures, which look decidedly storybook, exuding something of a prehistoric Rayman vibe; they're very beautiful in a wildly exaggerated way. The character designs deserve much praise too, as do the models. Artistry is in the hizouse at Avalanche. It must be the air in Utah. The triad of developers I know there (Incog, Glyphx Games and Avalanche) all do crazy art. Richly colored and shaded and full of life, from the smallest enemy to the largest, each critter in the game is meticulously modeled to their expressive best and the lush tropical environments are quite possibly the best of their kind. In the preview code there was the slight trade off of a less-than-stellar frame rate, but Avalanche is committed to 30 fps, which in this case would be more than adequate. I also found that Tak felt a bit heavy for a little guy, so they've got a couple of things to tweak.

If the team can button things up nice and tight, which I'm confident they will, this may be the platformer to beat going into Q4, and with a CGI toon in development slated for next winter, it's almost assured that Tak will live to club another day. I couldn't find a Starbucks to save my life in Utah, but man, do they brew up a mean video game. **play**

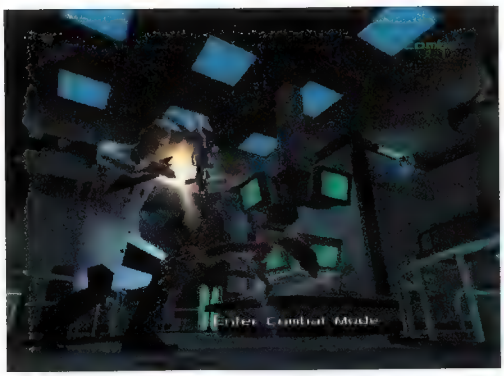


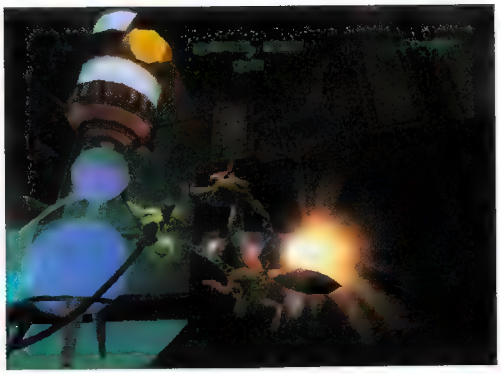
Whiplash

Not your typical action-platformer, and certainly not for kids

words brady fiechter

system: playstation 2, xbox
developer: crystal dynamics
publisher: eidos
available: october





The art style in the game plays perfectly off the strengths of the hardware.

Interview
Alex Jones **Whiplash producer**

play: I can't remember the last time I laughed this much playing a video game. Whiplash is quite a surprise!
Alex Jones: Thanks. Eidos took a risk trying something new, and every time we put this title in front of people, they are invariably taken with it, so it's great to have external confirmation on our ideas.

It's a tough market out there. What do you think really separates Whiplash from everything else?
Well, I think a number of things. For one, we are not attempting to make your garden-variety platformer. We have introduced elements that are generally missing from most platform games. Combat as a meaningful gameplay element, for instance, rather than a thin diversion from jump set-ups. Also, we have really worked hard to present a fictionally consistent game world to the user, and not rely on arbitrary elements like floating orbs or platforms to move the game along.

Eidos has recently mentioned a new focus in their game design. Are you approaching the development with a bit of a different mind frame?
I don't think so. Crystal has always been a place that excelled in third-person, character-based games, so I feel in making Whiplash we are being true to Crystal's roots, and Eidos itself has always had a stellar reputation for character-based games, and that has not and will not change fundamentally. So we are very much in that vein as well.

Was your original intention to have two characters working as one? Explain a bit how Spanx and Redmond work together.
I think Redmond might disagree about how collaborative their relationship really is... But yes, one of the original goals of this project was to make an authentic two-character game where the second character had a meaningful role in the gameplay and not become, as my director so eloquently put it, "a one-liner delivery mechanism."

Redmond is in essence the core mechanic of the game; you use him to navigate through the environment; he's your primary weapon, and he is the recipient of all of the game's power-ups.

Your artists look like they're having too much fun. The game looks absolutely fantastic.
I can honestly say this: this is by far the most talented group of artists—both level artists and character artists—I've ever seen on one project. To a man, they are exceptional traditional artists and great technical artists as well. To create such a highly interactive game world that is also visually rich is a comment both on the efficiency of our technology and the skill of our art team.

Was there anything in particular you're trying to avoid with Whiplash? By that, I mean, anything specific you looked at and said, "We're not going to fall into this particular template of design"?
The one thing that most comes to mind is a breadcrumb collectible system. It is one of the most tired and thoughtless aspects of most platform games. Their connection to the story is tenuous at best, and they frequently just seem like unnecessary playtime extenders. We do know, however, that players like to have a reward structure and feedback that they are on the right track, so we came up with destruction as a stand-in for collection. It makes perfect sense within our game world, it complements the story, and most important it is an enjoyable gameplay aspect. I mean, who can argue that smashing open a computer terminal and exploding it, then watching the company's net worth decrease as a result, is not a more compelling mode of gameplay than running over an orb and watching an HUD icon increment?

Talk a bit about your focus on story. I know you have a dedicated scriptwriter. When I spoke with him, he seemed impressively determined to create something smart as well as funny.
The mantra has always been, "strong premise drives a simple story." The premise of trying to escape from those who have taken your freedom is universally understandable and therefore makes an instant connection with the player. But the story is also where we can take some chances with the humor and sort of push the envelope, and Rich Gaubert (our scriptwriter) has done a great job not stepping on the simplicity of the premise with a convoluted plot, while managing to write some savagely funny stuff.

So what's the deal with Spanx going berserk and demolishing everything around him? How does that play into the dynamic of the gameplay?
Destruction of the company's property is one of the ongoing side quests throughout the game. In addition to escaping, Spanx is attempting to drive the company out of business and into bankruptcy. Destruction serves the in-game purpose of creating chaos and chaos causes the enemies to lose their heads and makes them easier for Spanx to defeat or elude, so it also has this practical gameplay use, which is something a collectible system never has innately.

Let's talk a little about the combo system. It removes the threat of randomness really well. Touch on the monetary system too.
The combat is one of those elements that distinguishes Whiplash from your run-of-the-mill platformer. Combos are something that need to be mastered—not all combos work on all enemies—and once mastered, you are rewarded by triggering a bunny power-up. So, it is a full-on feature rather than the throwaway diversion that it is in most games of our type.

The monetary system is one that tracks the net worth of the company; as you destroy their equipment this total decreases until they are bankrupt. It provides another layer of gameplay and gives the more intensive gamer another goal to shoot for.

This game is very adult with its humor. Talk a bit about the flagship products. And please expound on the shaved beaver spot.
We are actually aiming for humor that works on multiple levels. The in-game action/humor is very slapsticky and there are plenty of sight gags, but the story and a lot of the dialog is more satiric and is definitely something an older audience will appreciate. I think I'll claim the fifth on the shaved beaver, except to say we have a lot inappropriate people on the team and we needed to throw them a bone somewhere. **play**

"...players like to have a reward structure and feedback that they are on the right track, so we came up with destruction as a stand-in for collection."

SWAT
Global Strike Team

To kill is not always an option, altering the way you look at an FPS

system: playstation 2, xbox, pc
developer: argonaut
publisher: vu games
available: october

words brady fiechter

Interview
Leon Walters **Executive Producer**

play: One of the most appealing aspects of SWAT right out the gate was having to rethink the way I play an FPS. I think it's an awesome concept, balancing kill shots and moments where you have to cuff the suspect. What would you say is one area where SWAT plays off the stronger points of a familiar first-person action game, and the one area you really focused on to take the genre in an entirely new direction?
Leon Walters: When we started out moving the SWAT franchise over to console, we made a very conscious decision not to make a run-of-the-mill FPS and to focus a lot of our design effort on making something a bit different. We wanted to move the genre on a step or two. Our aim was to balance the very familiar aspects of a more common FPS and drop that into a more realistic world and make the player think, give them some choices about how they went about their business. For many people, playing a law enforcement team comes as something new to them and tend to love the life-and-death choices they are presented with during play—even if they chose to smack the civilians up with their rifle butts. If we're taking the genre anywhere, it's into a world that presents the player with these kinds of choices: should I arrest the guy or blow his head off? Is that a janitor running at me screaming or a terrorist? At face value, getting to grips with SWAT: GST is simple for anyone who's played an FPS before, but it has a lot of depth as well.

Were you guys ever tempted to stick to convention and pump out a typical FPS? Did you research real-world SWAT tactics? I'm assuming you have to balance the real with the fantasy to keep the game fun.
No, we always intended to have a team with the player—wingmen if you like—so we were never going to end up with a standard FPS. Having the team with you, and being able to verbally communicate with them, pushed us in some specific directions with regard to design. We did have some SWAT training with a guy from LAPD SWAT, which was fun, but we have had to temper that with what kind of game we wanted to make. So, apologies in advance to all law enforcement types reading this, but we've taken some liberties for the good of gameplay! Tactically, we don't force the player to play ultra-carefully; we'll leave that to the PC tactical sims. Our goal has always been to make a fun console shooter with some tactical elements. We took a lot of things too far initially—number of teammates, number of locations, level of realism and so on. We cut back a lot on the level of profanity that people tend to hurl at you when you shoot them, for instance.

What kind of cool technology are you using for SWAT?
The engine has been built from the ground up in-house and we do some cool stuff with dynamic lighting, hard-edged shadows and so on—all the stuff you expect in a PS2/Xbox title. The Iris/PFF effect simulates how you see in real life: stand in a bright room and look into a dark one and you'll just see black, but then move into the room and the detail slowly fades up. It's a nice effect and has some direct gameplay applications, however subtle. The same effect is used for flashbangs.

You chose to keep the arsenal of weapons and items fairly low. Personally, I like the impact of limited inventory.
Every weapon is customizable: you can add sniper scopes, recoil dampeners, larger mags, etc., to truly personalize your weapon as you progress through the game and get upgrade points.

Does it take a lot of work knowing just how much support you want your AI members to give you? I'm assuming you're aware of not going overboard with the member assistance. Seems perfect the way it is now.
Thanks, we like the balance now as well. "It's taken a LOT of work" is the simple answer. We didn't want them to play the

game for you, but at the same time they need to hold their own in a fight. I've seen people play levels just by ordering their guys to take people out and not fire a shot themselves.

How do you decide how many squad members to place in the game? Why stop at three, four, six? Is there a point where it just isn't practical any more?
We started at four, ended up with a team of three (including you) purely for practical reasons. Each of the teammates has unique skills, and act as tools that the player can use to complete levels. We wanted to maintain focus on this aspect for opening up a huge roster of characters, and giving the player a choice would mean they might embark on a mission without the skills needed to complete the level. It meant we could also manage character development and cutscenes better.

Talk a little bit about the voice command used to order the squad around. Did you toy around with the HUD a lot?
This was one of the first elements of the game to be designed and the gameplay has very much grown around this interface. You can play with or without the voice commands, using the D-pad if you feel stupid talking to your console. The HUD commands are context-sensitive and only have a few layers, but you can give out some fairly complex orders in a very short time. We've also put in a feature where you can shout at the bad guys to intimidate them—you can push a button or shout into the mic and they'll listen to you and sometimes give up. Firing off a few rounds above their heads and screaming "SWAT!" at them usually does the trick.

Would you say to fully experience the game, you gotta use the voice command?
No, it plays just as well without; it's all about personal taste, really. Personally, I love it; it's the most immersive FPS game I've ever played.

There's something gratifying about a real-world setting—traversing banks, taking out terrorists.
Thanks. We have office blocks, the London undergrounds, Russian military bases too—21 single-player missions set all over the world.

I quite like the dynamic of protecting your team as they, say, disarm a bomb. And I love having to be aware of the surroundings, like not storming a room knowing there might be that bomb just waiting to go off.
Not sure if you found it, but you can open doors just a crack as well, have a quick look inside, then roll in a flashbang, close the door and then burst in to see the carnage. But in some missions you have to be very careful, there's some nasty surprises.

I love a traditional FPS, but there was something so uniquely invigorating about disarming the enemy, fearing they might bolt or not listen to your orders! It really does change the way you look at the genre.
Thanks again. That's exactly what we've been aiming for. But, our over-arcing goal has been to give the player choice—play as good cop or bad cop. We hope we encourage people not to kill civilians; watching people play, even the most hardcore gamers often feel bad when they kick open a door and blow away the poor secretary hiding behind a desk. We've set up some nice moments in there too to give the player a real buzz: in the bank level, there's a gunman holding a woman hostage, if you kick open the door yelling "SWAT," she drops to her knees in panic, exposing the gunman, whose brains you can spread all over the wall behind him. All in the name of justice. The message is basically: if you want to respect the rules of engagement, then great. If not, that's fine too; you'll just get a different kind of reward.

So what else can you tell us about SWAT?
Multiplayer is definitely worth a mention! Ten co-op missions that intersect with the main story arc add a lot of replay value. We also have eight deathmatch-style levels, with some more in the pipe for delivery over the internet. **play**

You may think the situation is under control, then a thug panics and chaos ensues.

"If we're taking the genre anywhere, it's into a world that presents the player with these kinds of choices: should I arrest the guy or blow his head off?"

Fallout
Brotherhood of Steel

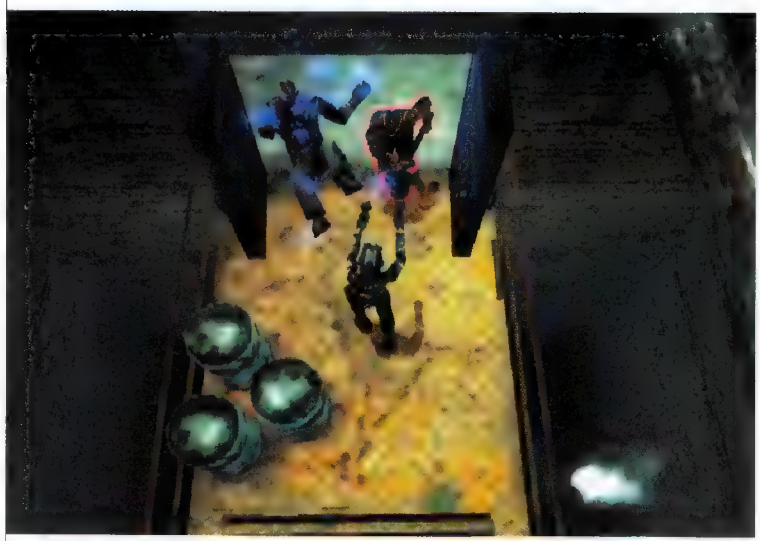
Six years later, the PC favorite finally gets a sequel on console

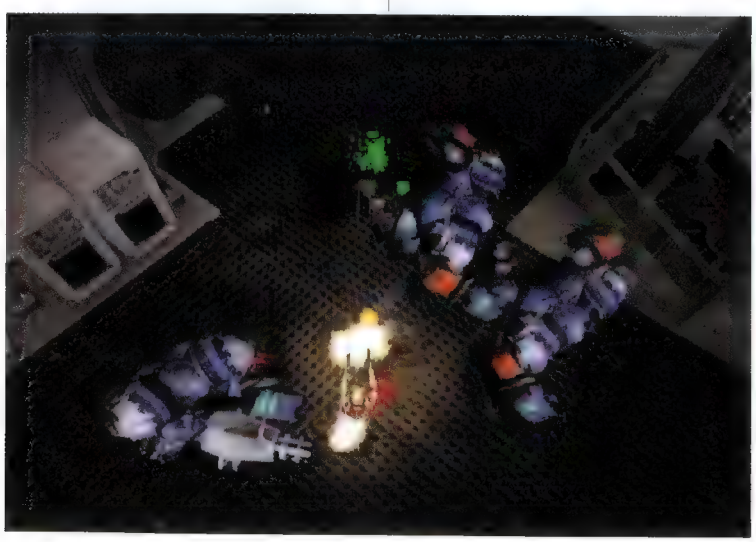
system: playstation 2, xbox
developer: vu games
publisher: interplay
available: october

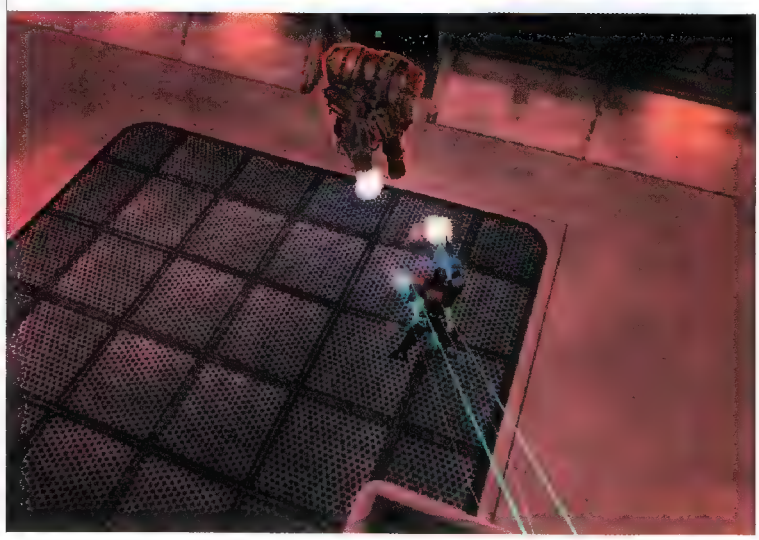
words brady fiechter

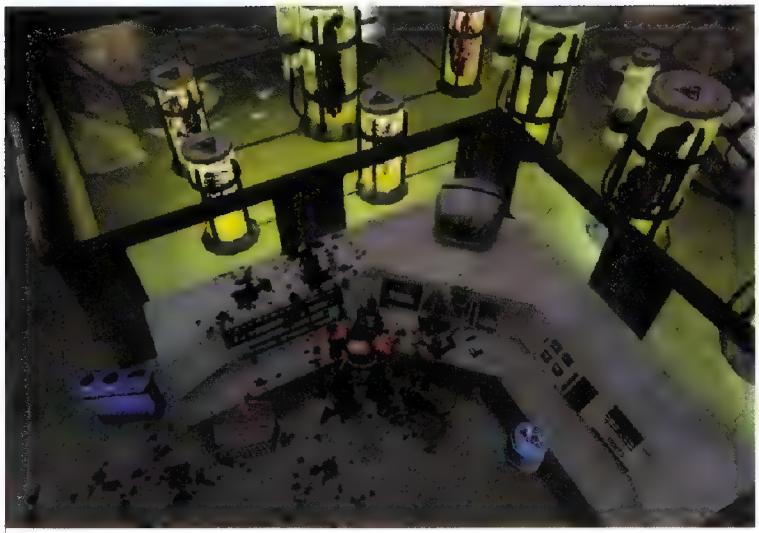
There was a time when blood splats, naughty words and scantily clad ladies sent game publishers apoplectic. Then all us troubled youths grew up, got high-paying jobs, rearranged the market and set the precedence for a new kind of gamemaking—mature, raw, assaulting. Don't like it? Too bad, cuz it's here to stay. Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel latches onto the fun that can be had with the more aggressive way of being entertained. Heavy metal grinds during the frantic cinemas. Giant bosses crush inhabitants with spiked bats. Townsfolk discuss picking their scabs. One of the first conversations you engage in is with a potty-mouthed inhabitant who succinctly points out: "Those f**king raiders."

The raiders he speaks of live in a post-apocalyptic world, left in shattered ruin after a nuclear holocaust flattened the earth in the 1950s. The hapless fools who survived struggle daily for their lives, trading bottle caps for weapons and food, living in pestilence and toxic waste. Making matters even more enjoyable are bloodthirsty mutants who have sprouted up across the wasteland. Here's where you come in, grabbing your guns and bludgeoning tools to form a band of badass combatants known as the Brotherhood of Steel. There's the vile Cain, efficient as a healer and balanced between melee attacks and long-range shooting. There's the big mo-fo of the bunch, Cyrus, great at close-range with nasty weapons like the spiked fists. And then there's the spiteful Nadia, always the delicate lady, standing at a distance with such lovelies as machine guns and flamethrowers; she's the only one who can pack dual weapons. Everyone gets to toy with a huge assortment of universal guns and armor, but you have to learn to play to each character's strengths and weaknesses, assessing what tools are best worth owning. A Gatling Gun may sound







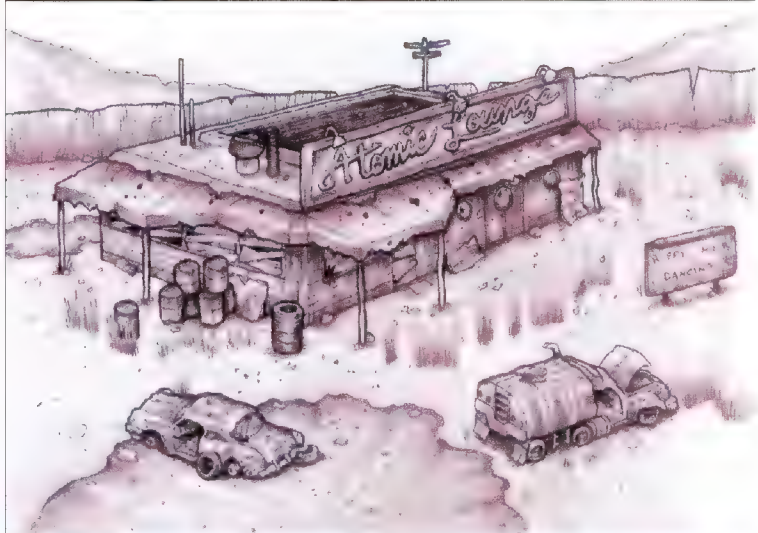


great on the surface, but then you're weighed down without the ability to move while firing; there's nothing like the damage of the meat cannon, but watch out for that recoil.

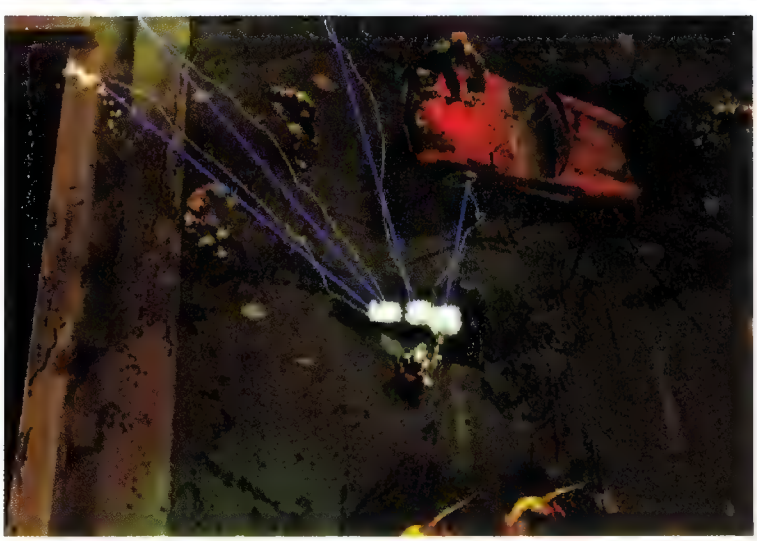
Throughout the 50-plus levels of play, your character will gain skill points and level up at a status screen resembling the one in Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance, a similar top-down action-adventure whose engine actually powers Fallout's settings. The gameplay complexity is nothing like what you found in the Fallout series on PC, leaning far more towards the action side of the fence. But the RPG elements here are nicely rewarding and do require lots of fun assessment: place your skill points towards, say, an Eagle-Eye enhancement to extend range; build on the Slayer technique and increase critical hits.

Because Fallout is played from an overhead perspective, tons of little details have been crammed into the screen, excellently portraying the caverns, towns, warehouses and deserts that build the crumbling world. Radioactive sludge spills out of barrels and flows across the streets. Overturned cars form bridges. Everything is collapsing, forming some sort of hazard around every corner.

There's a lot of emphasis on roaming and action, which is a smart move away from the PC's weighty dungeon crawling. The challenge is in the action, with an attempt to involve a good deal more strategy than what you normally get in a typical similarly toned adventure. Leaving head-scratching puzzles and heavy platforming for another day, injecting humor and comic-book energy without restraint, Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel seems almost a must as a two-player experience. File under late-night fun, adult beverages and friend in tow. **play**



The powerful Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance engine supports a detailed, gritty world that's sure to intrigue.



"Giant bosses crush inhabitants with spiked bats. Townsfolk discuss picking their scabs."

Gladiator

Sword of Vengeance

Enter the arena of animalistic glory and let the bloodshedding begin

words brady fiechter

system: xbox, playstation 2, pc
developer: acclaim
publisher: acclaim
available: october

Interview
Nick Dixon **Gladiator producer**

play: This game seems to have a few more adventure elements than what was hinted at during E3.
Nick Dixon: We had always intended for those elements to be in the game. However, to provide a good snapshot of the game for E3, where people typically play the game for no more than two minutes, it was very important to demonstrate the fighting system, the most important element, first.

Can you explain the backstory a bit? The game seems to have a good deal of storytelling going on. I really liked the choice to use a child's voice as the narrator early on.
I really think that by using children to represent the gods, we are advertising the childish nature of the Roman gods and providing them with an authentic representation. Part of the story is rooted in history...there was an Emperor Trajan...there was a Consular Arruntius (although we do not know that he was evil), and there were gladiators named Thrax. Of course, we depart historical truth with the murder of Trajan and the ascension of Arruntius. This evil emperor is an amalgamation of popular evil emperors throughout history. Taking a reference from Nero, he wants to demolish Rome and rebuild it in his own image, calling the new city Arruntium. As he attempts to deify himself in the process, the gods are being neglected and are losing power. Without their power...Rome is failing. It will be up to Thrax, as the gods' chosen champion, to restore the gods to power and depose Arruntius. However, Arruntius is backed by dark gods and so Thrax will need to enter the mystical realms to deal with these dark powers.

The use of lighting is striking. Has this been a big focus from the start?
When attempting to deliver a cinematic experience, we need big effects. The lighting effects help deliver that cinematic impact as well as put our visual competition into the background.

Fill us in on the technical side.
We have developed our own render engine and tools, which are capable of creating some really dynamic effects with projected shadows and images. These tools have allowed us to create significantly advanced environment effects, which aid the overall cinematic quality. The other benefit to these tools is that they allow us to dynamically change the lighting FX as the user progresses through the game. So green mist and lighting changes to red heat when you leave a dank cavern and enter a volcanic one. Again, as with top-end film production, we do post-processing on the scene to add the finishing touches that really make the game sparkle visually.

What's one thing that separates Gladiator from an ordinary action beat-em-up?
Should the player wish to simply bash their way through the game...they can do that, though they won't have an easy time if that is their strategy. The game will play easier, though, if the player decides to learn how to use the fight system and especially the different fight gauges. These gauges measure how well you fight, whether you roll/evade or switch

between opponents or regularly change combos. The better you fight, the higher the gauge rises. As the gauge rises, the more powerful you become. In this way, you begin to think like a gladiator—how will I best use the weapons and skills I have to defeat this opponent or group of enemies?

Explain the magic system a bit. I love the Herculean power up!
There are three battle magic powers available. The Herculean gives you speed, invulnerability and strength. You can also use it as a fourth combo string to pull off a shotgun effect, which is useful for defeating more powerful enemies quickly. It can also break through blocking enemies. The Plutonian causes wraiths to rise from the ground that you then paint opponents with. This has the effect of their defending Thrax, giving you time to deal with other enemies and then coming back to the other enemies. In addition, you can use Plutonian to regain lost health. Essential for later levels where we begin to remove health pick-ups altogether. Finally, there is Jovian... Let's just say it's explosive.

How does the combo system work? I only have access to a few levels, but the game seems to get progressively deeper.
Combos are actually string attacks. This means combinations of two attack buttons that are pressed in a more measured and deliberate manner. In this way, we are able to blend animations for different combos, especially useful for fighting multiple opponents without breaking animation. It also helps to simulate a deliberate attack, to give the player the feeling that they really are in control of the weapons.

You have access to three main weapons, correct?
Yes: sword (good mid-range weapon), axe (slow but strong) and gauntlets (fast but weak). Each weapon handles differently. For instance, you need to give yourself some distance to wind up the axe but when it connects it usually kills an opponent within one three-string combo attack. Having three weapons allows us to create unique in-game animations and unique execution moves to provide greater visual interest for the player.

Will there be a lot of arena-based areas to battle in within the world structure? Is this the basic gameplay component, or does the game branch into other types of play?
For the most part, the game location structure and camera system is similar to Devil May Cry or Lord of the Rings. There will be arenas both inside and outside of Rome, but the main adventure path lies on exploration. One thing I can promise: no single location is alike. Each part of the environment is different from the last. So keep moving. You'll want to see what the next area looks like.

Interesting that you chose to give the player an automatic jump.
Yep...I hate constantly falling to my death, don't you? After all, we're heroes, right?

Are there any ties here from Gladiator, the movie? Perhaps a few moments of inspiration? I love that grass in the second area—reminding me of the end of Gladiator.

It would not be unfair to say we have been influenced by Gladiator. At the end of the day it was a great film. To this end, I guarantee that this game will be the closest anyone will get to playing a game of that movie on any platform full stop. You want to visit the fields of Elysium...you can. You want to fight in the Coliseum to the screams of 60,000 people...you will. It is also safe to say though that the game is also influenced by the best of Ray Harryhausen. So expect to be fighting fearsome skeletons and Cyclops as well.

What kind of settings will we see in the final? There seems to be a ton of variety.
You will journey from Rome to Elysium and to the Ends of the Earth. Yes, there will be a huge variety of different locations, all looking gorgeous. The game will be, I promise you, a visual feast.

This game really got my adrenaline going in that first area in the Coliseum. Will we return to that area again?
Most definitely. The Coliseum will be the place of Thrax's death...and rebirth.

What kind of cool details are you placing in the game? I like the look of the caked blood on the blades.
There is tons of blood to spill. It's fair to say that blood will just about cover everything. We have spent a lot of time adding minor details that may only become apparent after repeated play. But like the best movie-makers, creating a believable world is about spending time crafting settings and items that offer an unconscious depth.

You know, just the theme of the game captures a unique bloodlust.
Indeed. If you have had a bad day at the office, just go home and pick up Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance. It will help iron out your issues.

When you guys started designing around this theme, were there any ideas you ended up leaving on the cutting room floor?
Inevitably, yes—there always is. But many of these might make it into a sequel if people like the original enough to warrant one.

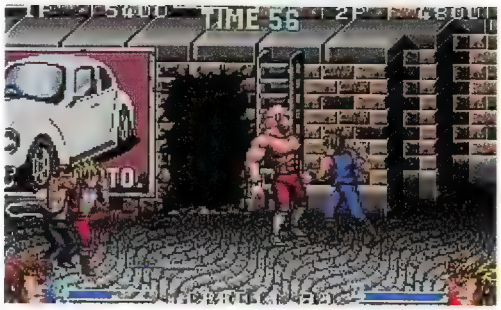
One thing that you're dying to let us know about Gladiator.
Sixty thousand people crowded an arena every day to watch 100,000 die for their amusement. There is no better setting for this kind of game. If you want to experience that then this is the game for you. On top of that...Thrax is officially the hardest mother in gaming history. **play**

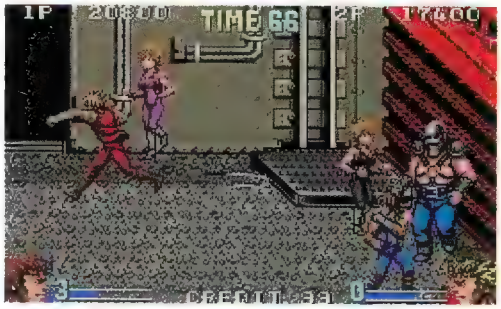
"Sixty thousand people crowded an arena every day to watch 100,000 die for their amusement. There is no better setting for this kind of game."

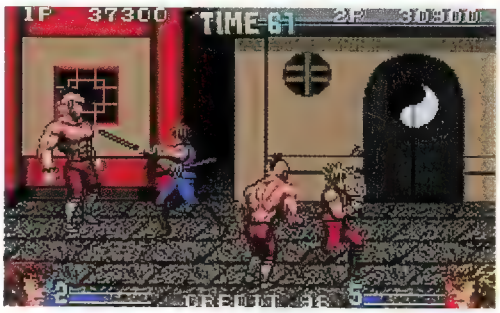
Double Dragon Advance

An arcade classic reinvented for the new century

system: game boy advance
developer: million
publisher: atlus
available: november







First you hear the thumping tempo of the old-school musical beats. Next, you press start, ushering in the classic misogynistic intro featuring the kidnapping of perennial hotty Marian. The garage door opens; the fighting begins. From visuals to sound effects, there is no doubt: this is indeed Double Dragon.

Then, as you begin putting Billy and Jimmy Lee through their paces, progressing through the stages, you have to ask yourself: "Or is it?" As good as Double Dragon was back in its day, back when breakdancing was cool and arcades were king, Double Dragon Advance is so much more.

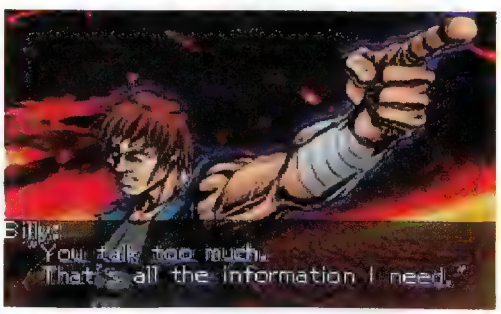
For starters, the Dragon Twins pack a much deeper repertoire than they did in their original arcade outing. Everything they could do then—punch, kick, jump-kick, back-elbow, throw—is featured here, along with new moves, many lifted from their later arcade adventures. A dashing uppercut, rising knee strike, spinning hurricane kick and double-footed stomp attack are among the more than a dozen ways to inflict pain, and the brothers can also now run and block attacks.

The level count of the game has also doubled from four to eight. The original arcade stages are all here, but new levels have been added to the mix. Again, subsequent adventures inspired the new levels, including a Chinatown stage and a ride on the back of a truck, both reminiscent of Super Double Dragon. Keeping with the theme, several enemies, bosses and even musical tracks have been taken from Double Dragon II.

But this isn't just a retro remix; excellent cutscenes now tell a fulfilling story, and new weapons let you unleash even more carnage. Better still, the game features a new mode where a single player can control both Billy and Jimmy together, truly putting the "Double" into Double Dragon. Naturally, a co-op link mode is included, or one player can just go at it solo.

In fact, just about everything I could have imagined being in a Double Dragon revival is featured here. Both grizzled arcade vets and Double Dragon virgins wishing for some good old-fashioned violence should keep an eye out for this one when it hits later this year. **play**

Don't remember this scene from the original Double Dragon? That's because half of the stages are new.



"The garage door opens; the fighting begins. From visuals to sound effects, there is no doubt: this is indeed Double Dragon."

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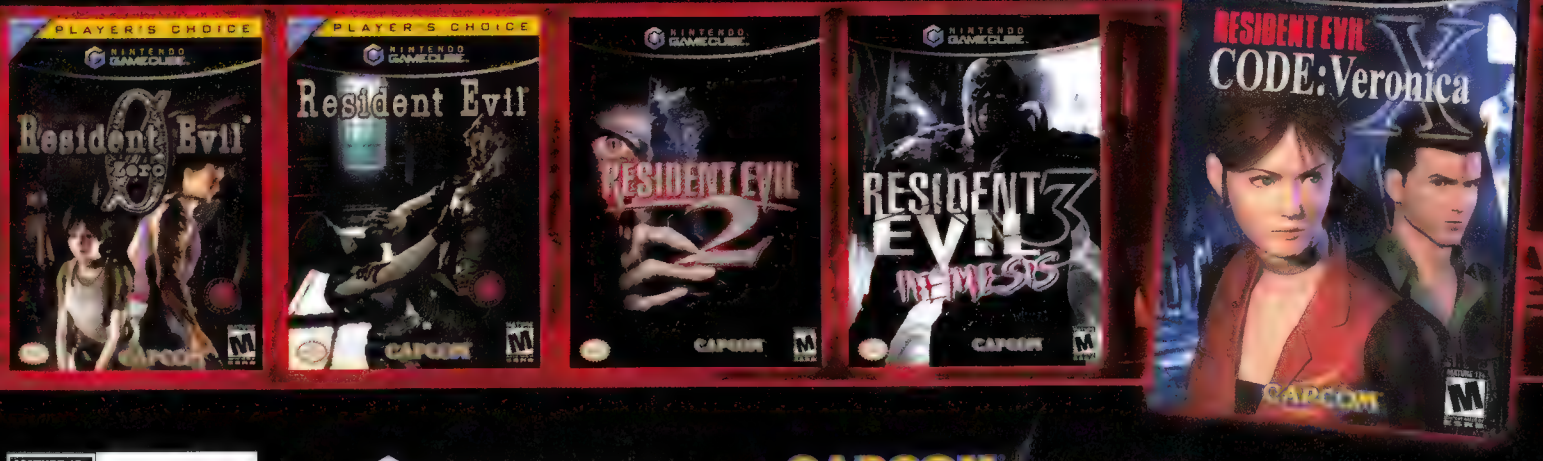

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Violence

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Ghost Hunter

system: ps2 / **developer:** studio cambridge / **publisher:** sony / **available:** tba

The award-winning Studio Cambridge, fresh off Primal, have shifted their focus to atmospheric action/adventure inspired by classic horror and suspense movies. Using their new, advanced Primal engine, Studio Cambridge are fusing combat, puzzles and exploration into a bone-chilling adventure with a strong narrative, intoxicating characters and, with any luck, just a sprinkle of the wicked wit the MediEvil series so eloquently delivered. With the guise of The Parliament of Spooks, whose sole aim is to steal back life from the living and one Lazarus Jones—Detroit cop come ghost hunter—the odds are fairly good. -DH

Karaoke Revolution

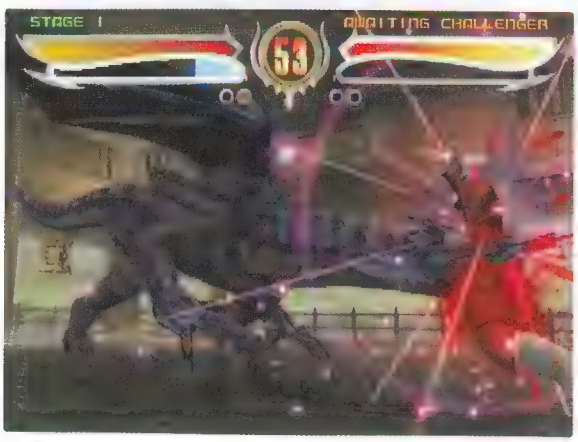
system: ps2 / **developer:** harmonix / **publisher:** konami / **available:** november

Certain to appeal to non-gamers everywhere, Karaoke Revolution dishes up the karaoke experience with only half the humiliation. Using the USB headset, wannabe singers can compete for points or just give it a free trial run, either alone or alternating with up to eight players. Thirty-five songs will be included in the final release, not only recent pop hits like the Barenaked Ladies' One Week and Avril Lavigne's Complicated, but also retro fare like Billie Jean and Like A Virgin. None of the songs feature the original artists, but since you'll be providing the vocals, that doesn't really matter much, does it? -CH

Advent Rising

system: xbox / **developer:** glyphx games / **publisher:** majesco / **available:** march '04

I happen to know a thing or two about Advent Rising—like that it may just change everything. With a story by award-winning novelist Orson Scott Card and the single most dedicated and talented new developer on the planet (Glyphx) hell-bent on delivering nothing less than cold fusion, all signs point to this becoming *The Matrix* of the video game world. Having spoken in-depth with the crew at Glyphx, about gaming past, present and future, I can personally vouch for their epic vision, and tell you first-hand that they are closing in on delivering the most cinematic gaming experience to date. -DH



Bloody Roar 4

system: ps2 / **developer:** hudson / **publisher:** hudson/konami / **available:** november

The Bloody Roar series is back once again, and this time out, there are a few changes. Three new characters—Reiji the Crow, Ryouhou the Dragon (very nice) and Nagi the Spurious (wicked cool)—join the returning cast from Bloody Roar 3. More significantly, the beast transformation system has been redone, with separate life bars for both animal and human forms; if one runs out, you'll automatically transform to the other, resulting in more action-packed, dramatic battles. A new character development mode has also been added for extra depth. -CH

Xbox Music Mixer

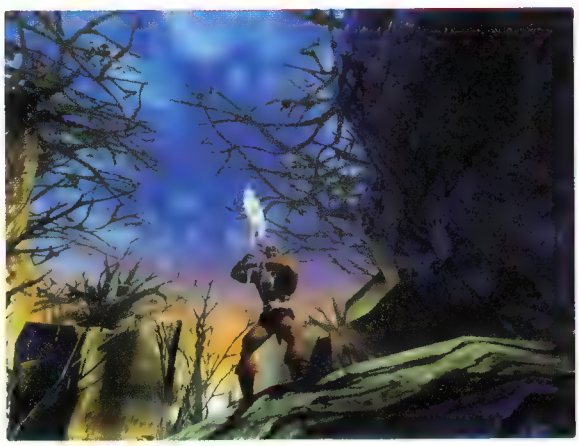
system: xbox / **developer:** wild tangent / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** october

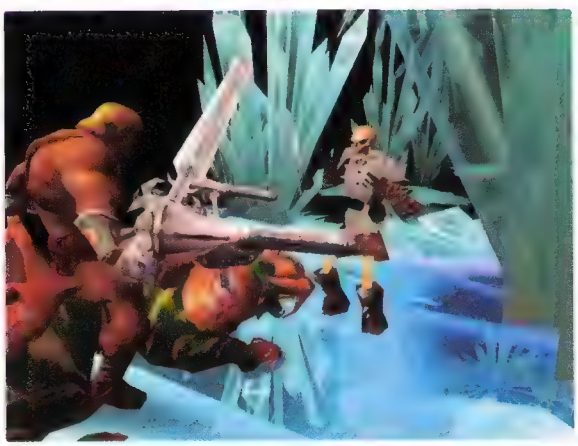
Music Mixer is so much more than a simple way to be a virtual DJ. That cool component does exist, but the real fun is being able to rip CDs, sing karaoke, upload digital pictures and do all sorts of audio- and video-manipulation magic. With an emphasis wisely placed on complete ease of use, bridging your PC with the Xbox is a snap. The key here is experimenting: tons of tricks can be played with the video portions, virtual raves can be created, MP3s transferred to the hard drive and embellished with sweet options. There's going to be Xbox Live support as well, which could conceivably open the Music Mixer up to endless possibilities. -BF

Spyro: Attack of the Rhynocs

system: gba / **developer:** digital eclipse / **publisher:** vu games / **available:** october

If you've played the previous Spyro games on GBA, then you'll have a good idea of what to expect here. This time, the diminutive dragon faces an enemy Rhynoc invasion through a rift in space, taking him through a total of 14 isometric worlds, such as Dragon Shores and Yeti Serengeti, which provide the backdrop for collecting hundreds of gems and accomplishing all manner of quests. VU Games promises new [redacted] will offer both co-op and versus play. -*CH*





Masters of the Universe—He Man: Defender of Greyskull

system: xbox / **developer:** savage entertainment / **publisher:** tdk / **available:** november

He says he has the power, but I'm still not sure. Granted, TDK's most promising game thus far does hold possibilities, but it also needs a good measure of polish to stand proud with the Xbox adventure elite. Currently, the gameplay's heart is in the right place, with plenty of intuitive swordplay and platforming/adventure elements (along with some potentially nifty 3D Battle Cat sequences), but the collision, jumping animation, animation in general and physics all need major work. Plus, Skeletor is sniffing about again. That bonehead just can't take a hint. -*DH*

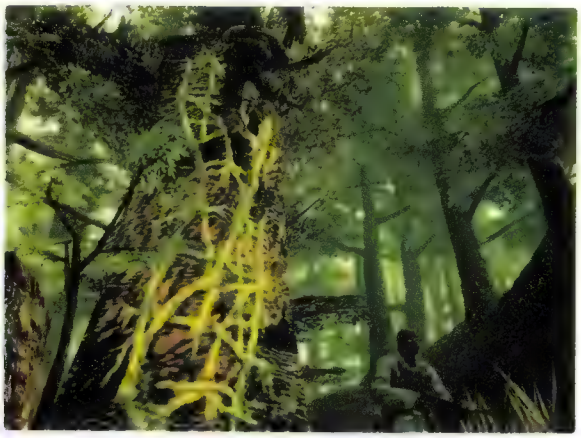
Aladdin

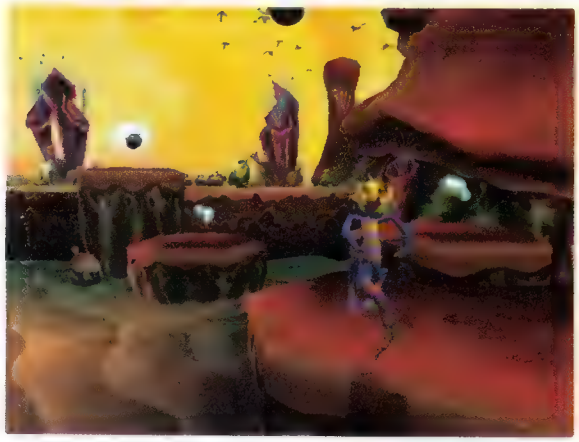
system: gba / **developer:** capcom / **publisher:** capcom / **available:** december

Sorry, Shiny fans, but this is not the hit Genesis game from years gone by. However, it is a port of Capcom's SNES Aladdin game, and it's a classic in its own right—a gorgeous, action-packed obstacle-laden platformer that offers a symphony of acrobatic challenges as Aladdin jumps, bounces, swings and glides from the streets of Agrabah to the Cave of Wonders and beyond. All seven stages from the SNES version await, and Capcom promises that new bonus stages have been added to each. -*CH*

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

system: ps2 / developer: kcej / publisher: konami / available: 2004

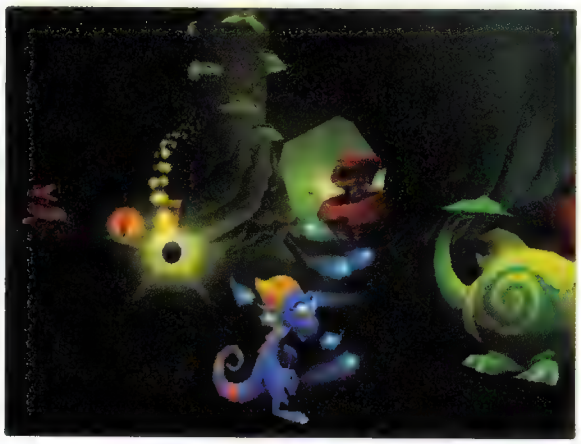




Scaler

system: ps2, gc, xbox / developer: artificial mind & movement / publisher: tdk / available: q4 2003

TDK's most-likely-to-become-a-franchise contender is a chameleon (Bah! There goes that Boy George tune again!) on the edge: Scaler. Cut from the tried-and-true hub-based platforming cloth, what sets Scaler apart (or at least what's billed to) is his ability to assume the shape of his opponents, and with it, any abilities they may have. Certainly an idea ripe for gaming. If Artificial Mind & Movement (I know...who?) can make a game of it, TDK may find themselves knee-deep in Gex lovers. *-DH*



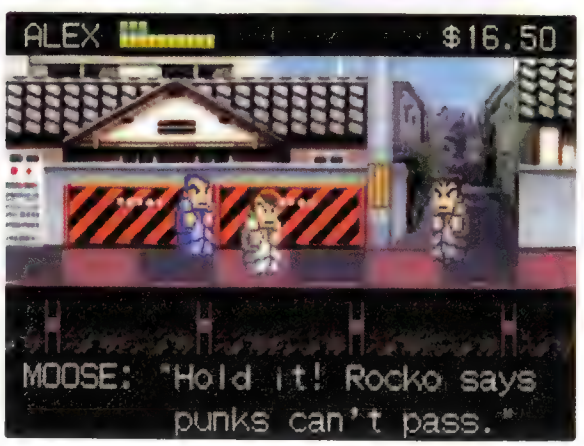
Time Crisis 3

system: ps2/ developer: namco/ publisher: namco/ available: september

River City Ransom EX

system: gba / developer: million / publisher: atlus / available: q1 2004

Staying true to the NES version's roots, River City Ransom EX recaptures the legendary design and gameplay of the original, only updated with better graphics and a more involved story. One of the deepest brawlers ever, it could almost be considered a fighting RPG, as players are able to buy more than 100 power-up items and learn a bevy of new techniques. Aside from the one- or two-player story mode, a versus mode is also included, and a unique link mode lets you use one GBA for gameplay and another to monitor stats and NPC progress. *-CH*



Gran Turismo 4

system: ps2/ **developer:** polyphony digital/
publisher: sony/ **available:** q4 2003

The recent ECTS has gifted us with some new screens of Gran Turismo 4, and here they are. What cruel form of torture of this? With the game still a few months off, all we can do is look and wait. At least we can mull over its impressive feature set in the meantime: 500 cars including Le Mans and Formula One cars, 100 track layouts and six-player online play. Series creator Kazunori Yamauchi is hardcore, so expect him and his team to push the PS2 to its absolute limit, delivering new levels of physics modeling and graphical sophistication. And no, there is no damage system. *-MH*

Transformers Armada

system: ps2 / **developer:** melbourne house /
publisher: atari / **available:** may 2004

Grabbed by the Ghoulies

system: xbox / **developer:** rare /
publisher: microsoft / **available:** october

It's a hung jury; the verdict is still out on Rare's first Xbox release, Grabbed by the Ghoulies. They graciously brought the game by and gave us the grand vision of their no-button approach—essentially the entire game is played using the analogs—which does have merit, but, without playing solo from the outset, it's hard to gauge just how well it really works. Each room (of which there are a hundred) seemed riddled with trial and error, which could wear the patience; knowing Rare, though, the power will shine through once we get one of our very own. *-DH*

Starsky & Hutch

system: ps2, gc, xbox / **dev:** minds eye productions
publisher: gotham games / **available:** september

Jak II

system: playstation 2
developer: naughty dog
publisher: sony
available: october

And you thought you knew Jak

words dave halverson

I can't remember ever being so torn, and I owe it all to Naughty Dog. I said most of my piece last issue (although Brady Fiechter's name snuck onto my preview), leaving a few things to chance: the city bits, the music (or lack thereof in the capital) and the length of the levels in new Jak city. So here it goes.

The city missions—timing stints, police chases, pick-up and delivery and the like—do improve drastically once you get the jet board under Jak; in fact, you'd be well-served to leave some of the tougher timing stuff alone until you get it. The drive-time music, however, is indeed kept to a single track that I'm not particularly crazy about; aside from during missions, it's the jungle boogie. To be fair, it's catchy enough and nicely layered, but the city is wrought with do-overs and although they're a welcome addition, they would definitely benefit from a GTA-style radio dial. Plus, imagine the stations...perhaps in Jak III.

As for the missions themselves, not only do they get longer (I complained of their minute length early on in my preview), but they rank among some of the most gorgeous and engulfing on PS2, often causing you to pause and soak in the grandeur of some of the most spectacular vistas on record. Above all, this game is testament to Naughty Dog's dedication to the craft, a penchant for animation that is almost scary and, of course, their new super-coder from Sonic Team.

But users beware: you're going to have to work for it. The platforming and boarding maneuvers in Jak II get downright insane, and there is no skipping missions. No matter how hard, eventually you'll be called upon to rise to any number of occasions. Forget what I said about Naughty Dog playing it safe and overdoing the focus testing; this is the old Dog circa Crash Bandicoot—spiked collar, slobbering, still thinking about that crappy apartment where they made Way of the Warrior. They made this one for gamers. The play mechanics swell out of control (targeting, shooting, double jumping your ass off, racing, jet boarding, flying...) and the sweet story builds with never-before-seen production values. I also appreciate them not rubbing dark Jak too much into my face. I like the new character and was happy to only go dark when absolutely necessary. I even began to like Daxter in this game, although that could be the alcohol talking...his, not mine. Wrapping up, the racing and mini-games are polished to perfection, the particle effects defy reason and the cast sparkles in both design and personality.

For what it is—the Jak universe plugged into a juiced GTA mold—Jak II is damn close to being a perfect game. You just have to want *this* game. I took some convincing, but the way has been opened. I'll live with the boogie. **A-**

"Above all, this game is testament to Naughty Dog's dedication to the craft."

The Hobbit

The Prelude to the Lord of the Rings

words dave halverson

system: gamecube, playstation 2, xbox
developer: inevitable
publisher: vu games
available: november

He's a hard Hobbit to break

Amidst all the violence and turmoil in the world, America's thirst for escape through fantasy and adventure remains, steadfastly warding off any possible reality overdose...or trying, at least. VU Games' The Hobbit quenches that thirst like a big stein of grog, sending up a pre-Lord of the Rings yarn in true Tolkien style. While I am in awe of what Peter Jackson has done with the trilogy, I'm equally enchanted by the fairytale side of this epic akin with the Ralph Bakshi animation and the visuals I associated with the books as a child. Inevitable has woven the tapestry of their game with a mixture of skillfully exaggerated CG and parchment pictorials to link events that draw comparison to Ocarina of Time (from currency to lock-on fighting), only in a more linear and action-oriented tradition.

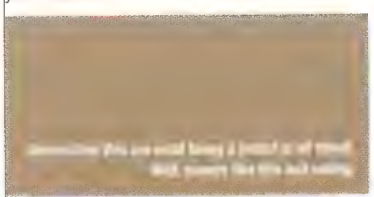
The Hobbit chronicles Bilbo's first quest after his spirit of adventure awakens in a dream, having fainted from Gandalf's decree that he join a legion of battle-hardened dwarves (including Gimli's dad!), setting out to slay a mighty dragon. The odd hobbit out in a band lead by Gandalf, Bilbo constantly finds himself at odds with not only the dwarves, but his surroundings in general, conveniently providing us with levels to enjoy!

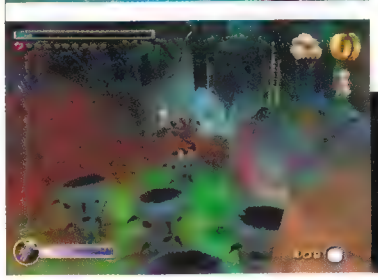
The game begins (oddly enough) like a condensed version of the underrated Fellowship of the Ring, as Bilbo prepares to exit the Shire, save that VU Games have learned their lesson and made it a brief stay. Tasks are kept simple and left to a training minimum as the story revs up. Within minutes of what is ultimately a very engaging sendoff, you find yourself waist-deep in a Zelda-style action/adventure, with a larger emphasis on stealth and platforming. Through mountain regions, ogre encampments, dark caverns, massive mines, dank forests and all places Middle-Earth you trek, using equal parts wit, stealth, sword, stick and dexterity, trotting blissfully to a thematic score that boasts the best acoustic guitar perhaps ever heard in a game. Further driving the adventure home, Inevitable applied dexterity to thieving as well (Bilbo's specialty) by installing a curiously addicting dexterity challenge to opening chests. On a gameplay scale, The Hobbit ranks among the best, mixing adventure and platforming as well as it's ever been done.

As such, however, the situations Bilbo finds himself in are often complex (with the stealth bits brought off especially well), challenging and strewn with potential ways to buy the farm, so, in true "E for everyone" fashion, Sierra has dotted the game with an unprecedented number of save points. Nary a few minutes pass between each, assuring that you will never have to go back beyond the very last tricky bit you've passed. Though it's purely voluntary how many you use and therefore harmless, I found this a drama drain, quelling any real peril. Why not just incorporate a PC-style save-on-the fly? I also found the state of the health and item icons obtrusive. Bright and in complete contrast with the environments, they practically scream "Hey dumbass, I'm a healing thingy, come get me!" and serve as a constant reminder that you're playing a video game, further sapping the spirit of the material. Luckily for Sierra, the game is so good, it barely matters.

Although the architecture and detail are on the simplistic side, the actual level design is outstanding, as is the control, flow of the game, and the diverse nature of the locales. Bilbo is always learning something new and you can spend the money you so jovially lust after in a number of ways, adding yet another Zelda-esque pea to the pod. It also bears mention that I played the game on the lead platform, the GameCube (for a change). With any luck, the PS2 version will fare as well, although the screens I've seen don't say as much.

There are a ton of platformers vying for your attention this time of year, but with the third film in the wings, and this being by far the best game the series has rendered, The Hobbit deserves a place among the top of your list. **B+**





"You find yourself waist-deep in a Zelda-style action/adventure, with a larger emphasis on stealth and platforming."

Boktai

The Sun Is In Your Hand

The creator of Metal Gear shines a new light on the GBA

words chris hoffman

system: game boy advance
developer: kce japan west
publisher: konami
available: september

I hope Hideo Kojima is happy with what Boktai has subjected me to. It has, as he intended, made me an outdoor gamer. As I sat for long hours in the California summer heat, my skin grew red with sunburn, I had to deal with spiders crawling on my arm, and something unseen caused me to bleed from the thigh. Despite all this, I pressed onward with the adventures of Solar Boy Django, and I harbor no ill will for my minor wounds, because the payoff of playing an adventure as rarely unique as Boktai made it quite worth it.

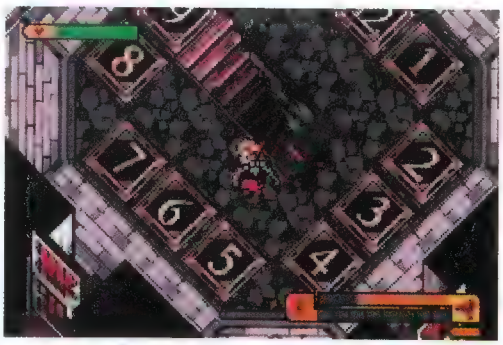
As most gamers are aware, Boktai's standout feature is the inclusion of a sun sensor that powers your weapon and in other ways affects gameplay. Despite what Konami may have reported, it is impossible to play through the game without using the sun somewhat, nor would you want to; this added dimension of interactivity allows for some truly innovative puzzles and combat that's slightly deeper than the norm.

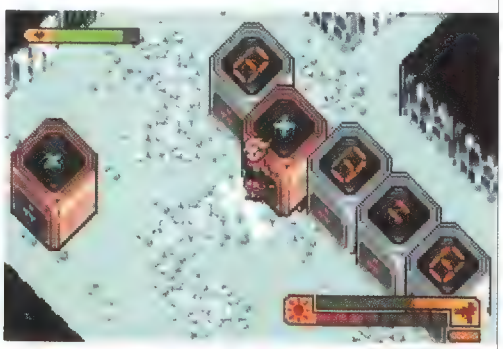
The puzzles, actually, are the true substance of Boktai. Not all of them involve the sun, but a good number of them tax the brain in other ways, ranging from arithmetic puzzles to block-pushing to reshaping the geography of some areas, and they perpetually keep the game interesting. Boktai, at its core, is an isometric adventure consisting almost purely of exploring dungeon after dungeon, and were it not for the fantastic puzzles, Boktai would be a mere shadow of what it is.

In fact, if you're looking for exciting combat, or other RPG-like elements, you'd best look elsewhere. Outside the boss battles (which exhibit a thoughtful, puzzle-like flair), combat is frowned upon. You can still fight, and enjoyable though it is, the idea is to avoid conflict a la Metal Gear, and Django can even slide along walls and tap his hand to draw enemies' attention. Also, aside from a number of restoratives, gun mods and elemental lenses (again, crucial to puzzles), there's little in the way of equipment to obtain, and aspects like NPCs or a viable overworld are absent.

While the lack of a fully fleshed-out experience will prevent Boktai from taking its place with Kojima classics like Metal Gear and Snatcher, it's this distinct style that carves it a niche all its own. Playing a game outside isn't something I feel an affinity for, or even enjoy, but it's something I will do again, because Boktai is a game worth replaying. **B+**

"...this added dimension of interactivity allows for some truly innovative puzzles and combat that's slightly deeper than the norm."



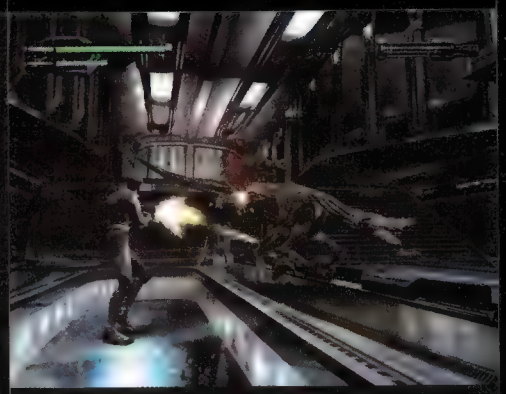


Dino Crisis 3

The dinosaur crisis moves to the depths of space

words brady fiechter

system: xbox
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: now



Science fiction often inspires such fascinating visions, taking us to the mysterious edges of space and into worlds where life and technology are so far removed from our own. Fans of the genre can agree: there's nothing like losing yourself in the wonder of a future alien place. In Dino Crisis 3, this place is an enormous, shape-shifting space ship, where the chilly mood radiating from serpentine layers of antiseptic steel raises your hairs like static in the air. The reflective walls and floors bend and warp images of cool anachronistic machinery all around you, so slickly polished that you feel like you're part of some ominous, quarantined experiment. The pull of Dino Crisis 3's look is its greatest strength.

In a ship like this, the last thing you'd expect to encounter are dinosaurs, yet somehow a countless herd of them has infested the corridors. These aren't the typical history-book beasts: some of them have no skin, some of them have snouts that shoot energy charges. And they're all obviously very much in love with eating anything that lives and wreaking havoc on the ship and its systems. Your mission: discover what's wrong with the joint and why these creatures keep materializing all over the place.

Fortunately, you're well equipped to defend and attack, zipping around on a jetpack and utilizing nifty weapons you'll be able to purchase and upgrade. The efficiency of the sweep rewards you with increased currency, which can also be collected in the form of energy balls arbitrarily scattered throughout the ship. The game has a very classic lean: explore and kill, build your inventory, find a key, open a door, activate a switch, explore and kill some more.

Confronting the dinosaurs directly is not always the best course of action; this is an offshoot of the survival horror template, after all, and the game doesn't deviate too much from the aging design approach Capcom essentially pioneered and feels no immediacy to shake up. The most rewarding parts of the gameplay are the general exploration aspects and the platforming spots, but even these can be extremely frustrating when having to deal with constant disorientation. The designers chose to fix the camera, which would have been acceptable if not for the poor choice to often come in tight on the character, making confrontations with the enemy almost always a matter of shaky instinct rather than skilled reaction. This type of presentation is certainly cinematic and visually exciting, but while it worked just fine in Resident Evil, the much faster gameplay here collapses under the duress of fighting with anticipating where the enemy is coming from. Further compounding the problem are poor design choices involving where the camera is focused and at what moment it cuts, making even general exploration tedious when you often lose where you are in the room. The overall system is curiously inappropriate for the gameplay, weakening almost every strong point the game possesses.

Mention must also be paid to the heavy backtracking. The idea of restructuring the layout of the ship by traveling to computer terminals is novel, but while this design approach was meant to make going back through an area more interesting, it ends up making the journey that much more arduous with what still amounts to such little change in the scenery. Early on, there's a point where you go through several long stretches to activate a power source, only to be told you have to hightail it on back to rearrange the ship once you get there. This is just one example of unusually strained gameplay structure, even for the genre.

For all the times Dino Crisis 3 lets you down, you experience moments that pick you back up to carry your interest through; racing to open an airlock and weightlessly floating around outside the ship in the beauty of space is a rush. As a sci-fi lover, it's hard to escape the thrill of the setting and the exceptional CG sequences that link the key action scenes, and the booming score continually ratchets up the suspense. I came away entertained and frustrated, disappointed yet more than open for a sequel.

No, we play a game to play, not watch, but, oh my, how nice it all looks, especially those fantastic cinema cutscenes.

"...they're all obviously very much in love with eating anything that lives and wreaking havoc on the ship and its systems."

Mega Man X7

At least it's a lot better than X6

words chris hoffman

system: playstation 2
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: october

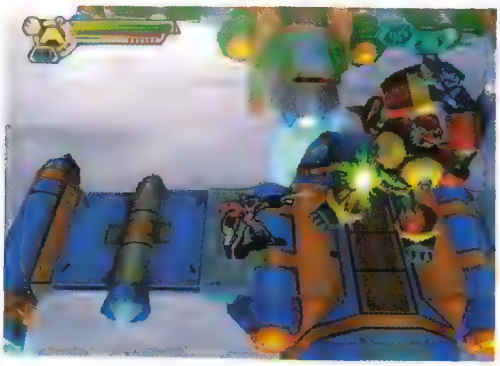
Let's face it: the Mega Man X series, even to staunch Mega Man supporters like myself, is dangerously close to being stale. Even after the sixth installment, very little had changed from the first other than a notable drop in quality. So this time, something radically different is being offered by Capcom, the most monumental change to the X series yet: 3D gameplay. And while I applaud seeing something new in the series, the lesson learned here is that new doesn't necessarily mean improved.

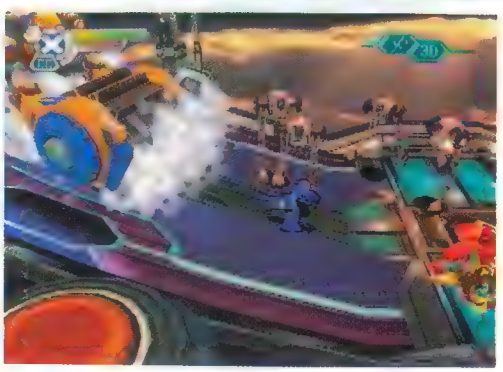
Though the basic Mega Man tenets remain intact—play through level, kill boss, gain new ability—compared to modern games, many of the 3D levels and the accompanying gameplay feel like a freshman effort. New aspects have indeed been added to exploration and combat, yet absolutely nothing is extraordinary about the 3D levels, and the auto-aim feature dilutes the action. Many areas are low-concept, as if someone had an inkling of an idea that was executed before being properly realized, like one stage that involves little more than running up a spiral staircase. Additionally, the camera is occasionally locked at undesirable viewing angles, and the hit-and-run nature of the boss battles make them mere shadows of the pattern-heavy goodness of previous installments.

Fortunately, Mega Man X7 does have redeeming qualities. A few areas with the 2D play style feature intense action and sparks of greatness, the cel-shaded graphics are pretty darn nice, and the story is much better than in previous X titles (although the voice acting borders on pathetic). Granted, the story is somewhat unimportant—I'm sure any fan knows who makes a shocking return at the end—but it's a pleasant touch. The character customization is also quite nifty, and finally Capcom has used the cool Japanese names for the bosses.

Were the above features combined with the great platforming and action that early games in the series were known for, then Mega Man X7 would be an amazing game. Instead of playing up the series' strengths, however, Capcom went for something new, and I found the results rather unimpressive. I'll be playing Mega Man Zero 2 for my Mega Man fix this fall. **C+**

"...many of the 3D levels and the accompanying gameplay feel like a freshman effort."





Hunter the Reckoning Redeemer

All grown and everyone to blow...up

system: xbox
developer: high voltage
publisher: vu games
available: september

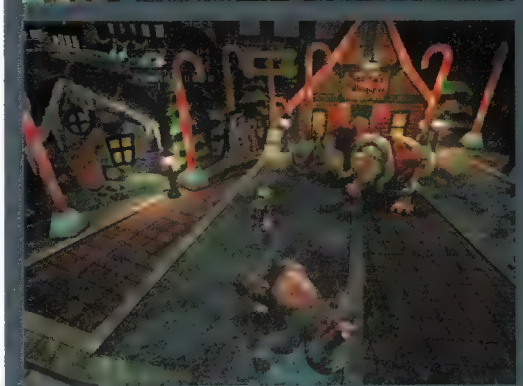
words dave halverson

Prior to embarking on Hunter: the Reckoning Redeemer, I took its PS2 cousin, Wayward, for a spin, and as much as I hate to say it, there's just no comparison; it cowers in the shadow of one of the best action shooters since Loaded. Based on White Wolf's most recent pen-and-paper RPG series, Redeemer takes place 10 years after the events of Hunter: the Reckoning, when four pissed-off Hunters liberated the sleepy town of Ashcroft by slaying more demons than a Buffy marathon. Anyone who played that game surely remembers the 10-foot-tall demonic teddy bear (second only to the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man in the annals of evil childhood deities) that took a ton of lead to bring down, after it massacred an 8-year-old girl's parents, sending her tearing into the night, newly "Imbued" (the realization that you see dead people, along with the cojones to kill them), to be rescued by her future brethren. That little girl, Kaylie Winter, is the Redeemer, back after ten years of honing her skills—now one hot, young killing machine, packing a conscience, and a Cloud Strife-size blade.

Thankfully, Redeemer is not about killing all and moving on—the fly in Hunter's ointment since day one, along with the backtracking baggage that came with it. Instead, we get a story rooted beyond mere infestation, about a wicked corporation spicing up there special sauce with a secret ingredient to amass a powerful mutant army, leading to more adventure elements and some truly inspired CG cinemas.

The gameplay is much the same—kill monsters by melee, gun or Edge, find the key, item or information to move on, rinse and repeat—but there is more purpose, less repetition (the levels are more condensed and diverse) and far better enemies. The beauty is in the execution. They've elevated the experience with better production values and a more integrated story, a seemingly simple tweak that goes a long way in a genre plagued by repetition. The graphics, meanwhile, are gorgeous, especially in the dank recesses of the game—lit by a small clip-on light much like in Silent Hill—and the character models and designs are at their juicy best. I wish I could say I love the ambience too, but I think it could have been be better. The lighting and effects certainly do their part, but the soundtrack is somewhat wanting. Glimmers of metal can't save it from too many moody murmuring lulls. Redeemer could do with a more neo-Gothic epic feel, along the lines of Devil May Cry 2.

In the grand scheme of things, however, if you're an action/shooter fan, Redeemer is pretty much a must-have. It wears its Xbox-exclusive badge proudly, pouring out rich, shimmering environments, littered with highly detailed and animated ghouls at 60 fps with abandon, and it's a great four-player game. Imagine the love, sitting with three friends plugging away with gun, Edge and blade—one of you can whip out a rocket launcher and literally blow limbs and sauce everywhere—and no slow down! Now that's bloody good entertainment. **B**



"They've elevated the experience with better production values and a more integrated story, a seemingly simple tweak that goes a long way in a genre plagued by repetition."

You better not shout, but you probably should cry, you'll definitely pout, I'm tellin' you why...Santa's going to eat you.

Welcome to Vana'diel

Final Fantasy XI Online

Last month we brought you a quick first look at Final Fantasy XI Online. This month, I would like to go further in depth on one of the driving forces of the gameplay: the basic battle system.

words michael hobbs

Battle Mode
The Ochu misses Kobiak.
Ocelora hits the Ochu for 193 points of damage.
Kobiak hits the Ochu for 42 points of damage.

Battle Mode
Shiroro
points of damage.
The Goobbue Farmer misses Bishop.
Bishop hits the Goobbue Farmer for 84 points of damage.
Kobiak misses the Goobbue Farmer.
Bishop hits the Goobbue Farmer for 74

system: pc (also ps2)
developer: squaresoft
publisher: square enix
available: october (pc), q1 2004 (ps2)

"The battle system really comes to life is when playing with a party."

Fees revealed

Final pricing details have been announced for the PlayOnline service and the fee for playing Final Fantasy XI. There will be a flat rate of $12.95 per month to play the game. In addition, there will be a $1 monthly charge for each character that you create. Considering that character data is stored on Square's servers and not locally for a variety of beneficial reasons, this fee is not out of the ordinary.

Though it initially appears simple, maybe even boring, FFXI's battle system is a rich one, full of strategy and excitement. The only caveat is that a well balanced and skilled party of players is required for maximum enjoyment and advancement.

The best place to begin describing the combat system, however, is in solo play. Combat begins once you select an enemy and attack it (or are attacked by an aggressive foe). Prior to this, you can check an enemy's strength relative to yours. This is important not only for your survival but also so you can gauge what sort of experience is to be gained from fighting it. Once an enemy is targeted and engaged, your character will begin attacking automatically. The speed of your attacks depends on many things, the most important being the delay of the weapon you are using. The point here, though, is that you don't execute each attack as in PSO. However, you can execute a number of commands while attacking, and depending upon your chosen job (or jobs), you can cast certain magic and execute special weapon skills and job abilities, all of which are learned as you gain levels.

Where the battle system really comes to life, however, is when you are playing with a party. At its most basic, a good six-member team might consist of two white mages, a black mage, two warriors and a monk. The white mages stay in the background, not physically attacking the enemy, to provide curing and enhancing spells like protect on the party. The black mage is there to provide devastating attack power and to cast enfeebling magic like bind and poison on the enemy. But with their low hp, black mages must also stay in the background. The problem with both the white and black mages here, however, is that casting magic generally attracts the enemy to the caster, making them very vulnerable. This is where the warrior(s) come in. With their special ability to provoke, they can keep enemies focused on them so that they absorb all of the hits, freeing the mages to cast at will. Rounding out this team is a monk for some added firepower, though you could also use a red mage. They have the ability to use both swords and magic, making them good for healing in a desperate situation, while still providing a decent amount of attack strength. Of course, these permutations get greatly more freeform once you gain the ability to run support jobs and the resultant additional abilities.

So the configuration above represents your basic beginner team, but then what to do with this well-balanced party? That's easy. Apart from tackling difficult missions and quests, a good team will allow you to rack up experience chains, and these are awesome fun. To get a chain, you must fight strong enemies in fairly quick succession. With each fallen foe that satisfies the chain, the experience builds and builds. But since these enemies are strong, it takes leadership, planning, and skill to pull it off. You've got to have alert and smart white mages keeping everyone alive and healthy, and you've got to have similarly adept warriors taking the hits and dealing the pain. The others, whether they be monks for bashing or black mages for intense magic attacks, have got to be just as focused on their tasks, keeping tabs on the conditions of others and the flow of the battle. And trust me, stringing together a good chain is an exhilarating and addictive experience that I didn't imagine when I first got to grips with the combat system. But as with everything else in this game, there is a lot more to it than the basics I have described here. You can find out for yourself in time. **play**

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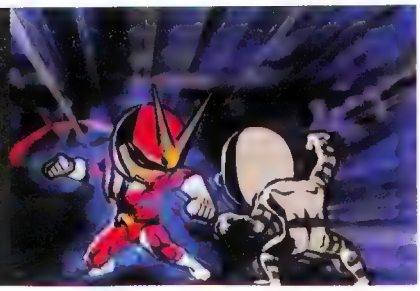
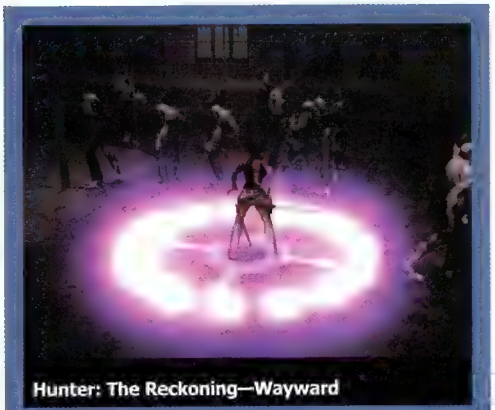
game of the month

018 Viewtiful Joe

The first game in a movie that deserves to be made into a movie!





Hunter: The Reckoning—Wayward

Here's one of those games that starts out full-throttle, quickly entertaining with its assaulting action. There's very little to

leave it, where the monsters materialize out of the ground in completely arbitrary points. The game deserves mention for good looks and atmosphere, but there just isn't enough inspiration across the board to maintain your interest. -BF

• **system:** ps2 • **publisher:** vu games
• **developer:** high voltage • **available:** now

C

Mega Man Zero 2

is superb. Unlike the first Mega Man Zero game, MMZ2 isn't

Additionally, the ability to evolve into new forms and the returning

• **system:** game boy advance • **developer:** inticreates • **publisher:** capcom • **available:** september

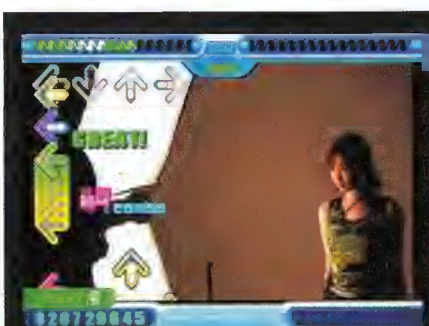
A

Risk: Global Domination

Virtual board games just don't work. Or is it that no one has really been able to find the exact way to preserve the distinct experience of gathering with friends around the table, tangible pieces in hand? Whatever the key to success is, Risk: Global Domination actually gets it surprisingly right. The visuals are pleasing enough without being obtrusive; too much flash would compromise the heart of the original game structure. Sure, a little more production value would be nice, but there's no reason to get too nitpicky given the strength of the faithful gameplay component. Add in the obvious appeal of online play and Risk: Global Domination comes off as a well-laid effort. -BF

• **system:** ps2 • **publisher:** atari
• **dev:** hyperlore studios • **available:** now

B

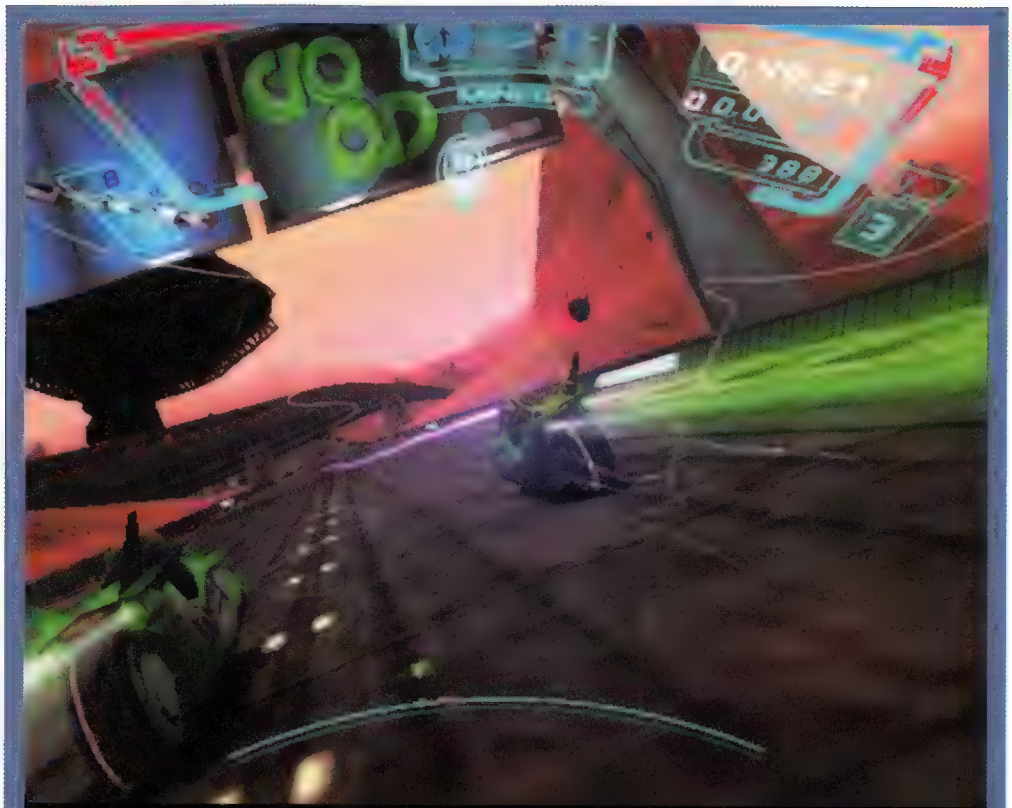


DDRMAX 2 Dance Dance Revolution

The big problem I have with the DDR games is that for the most part, the modes of play remain basically unchanged from version to version. That was the case with DDRMAX and that is still the case with DDRMAX 2. The only things players can look forward to are new licensed tracks for the US market and a new graphical interface showing off the music video at the same time. Wow! Other than that, the game is virtually identical to DDRMAX. All of the popular features such as Freeze Arrows, Workout Mode and Edit Mode have been included as well. Don't get me wrong, DDRMAX 2 is still fun and a must for any fan of the series, but it would've been nice to have seen more in terms of new modes of play and improved visuals. -TH

• **system:** ps2 • **developer:** konami • **publisher:** konami • **available:** now

B



XGRA

will find enthralling. To the euphoric sounds of BT, you will

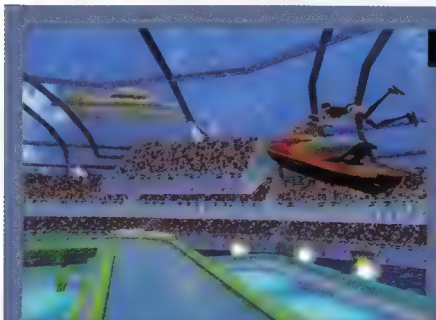
• **system:** xbox, ps2, gamecube • **developer:** acclaim cheltenham • **publisher:** acclaim • **available:** now

B

Disney's Magical Quest 2

The first Magical Quest game, in my opinion, was a wonderful gem of a platformer that, like Disney films, was able to transcend age with its charming visuals and well-executed gameplay. This sequel, a port of the 16-bit title The Great Circus Mystery, doesn't quite live up to that standard. Though better than the average GBA game, it has lost the thoughtful design of the first, and the costumes, which were rather noteworthy before, are less interesting and not integrated as well into the levels. Any hint of challenge, even in hard mode, is also gone. Magical Quest 2 isn't bad, but should have been better. *-CH*

D+



Splashdown: Rides Gone Wild

to Nintendo's medley of style and physics – the reigning king of the

all into the execution of their physics-based racer, after laying down the wettest water on PS2, crumbling environments that defy the hardware,

"Thunder"). Boost power is available but not contingent on winning, the

the two types of venues give you that long-lasting freshness. Add variable weather and a sea of upgrades and these are depths you need to plumb, right now. *-DH*

• **system:** ps2 • **developer:** rainbow studios • **publisher:** thq • **available:** now

B

Robin Hood: Defender of the Crown

Defender of the Crown has been around for years—it even made it onto the Commodore 64—grabbing an esoteric fan base with its medieval brand of strategy. This newest adventure has a classic sensibility that's uniquely appealing alongside the modern trappings. It's a bit clunky and doesn't have the bold production values we've become consistently accustomed to, but with an especial interest in medieval themes and the fun Robin Hood story mixed up a bit and handled quite well, a gradual charm begins to bubble up, elevating the mundane stretches of play: some action parts feel tagged on, leaving most the appeal to strategy. The art style carries a nice mood fantastically charged with a cinematic score. *-BF*

• **system:** ps2 • **publisher:** capcom
• **developer:** cinemaware • **available:** now

C+

Soul Calibur 2

Soul Calibur 2 is no Soul Calibur. No matter, because building substantially on a masterpiece is almost impossible to achieve. So let's dispense with comparisons and praise this awesome sequel for its collection of 23 superbly designed fighters battling it out across a huge variety of gorgeous settings. If you want to play the game for months, the rewards continue to stack up – learning the nuances of the fight mechanics, understanding greater techniques that aren't immediately evident, mastering new fighters and of course the entirely different dynamic of the two-player experience. With the grace, speed and precision of a great 2D fighter placed exactly in a 3D mold, Soul Calibur 2 is the only fighter I'll need for a very long time. *-BF*

• **system:** ps2, gc, xbox • **pub:** namco
• **developer:** namco • **available:** now

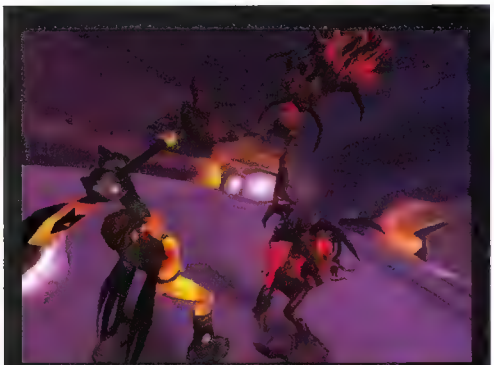
A-

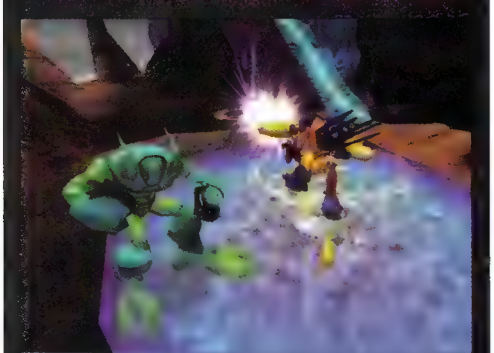
Wallace & Gromit in Project Zoo

Wallace & Gromit is an odd kind of platformer, deliberately paced and offering some unique teamwork elements to complement the collect-a-thon gameplay. Everything about the game is on the right path, but not quite refined enough to push it into the realm of greatness. The models and animation capture the look of the short films, yet look rough around the edges; the camera is decent, but fights you when it really matters; and the music is quite good but strangely out of place. It also simply lacks the all-important intensity that games like Jak and Mario have in spades. *-CH*

• **system:** ps2, gc, xbox • **publisher:** bam!
• **developer:** frontier • **available:** september

B





Alter Echo

How strange is it that upon completing arguably one of THQ's best games to date, the Alter Echo team was disbanded? Yes, Outrage has left the building. While it's not exactly triple-A, Alter Echo is one of the most innovative and all-around interesting action-adventures you're likely to play this year. I certainly recommend it. Time Dilation—a real-time rhythm-based combo engine—is a cool idea, and the living world theme is integrated smartly into the action, which involves three distinct on-the-fly types of gameplay: shooting, platforming and wonderfully orchestrated and lit swordplay. The story works, the bosses are cool and the buddy play is engaging; there's little here to dis. The trippy visuals and architecture are eerily simplistic, but you're on a taffy planet—that's expected. I guess when you have a Tak and a Sphinx, you don't need an Alter Echo, but I dug it. *-DH*

• **system:** ps2, xbox • **publisher:** thq
• **developer:** outrage games • **available:** now

B

Freedom Fighters

Freedom Fighters is one of those games that generates no prerelease hype, carries no sequel status and seems casually familiar on the surface—squad-based action game, a chunk of strategy to build in complexity, set in a shadowy landscape with a military trimming. Surprise: this game is relentlessly entertaining, finely crafted and smartly engaging. The story follows Chris Stone, a blue-collar worker who joins forces to help quell a

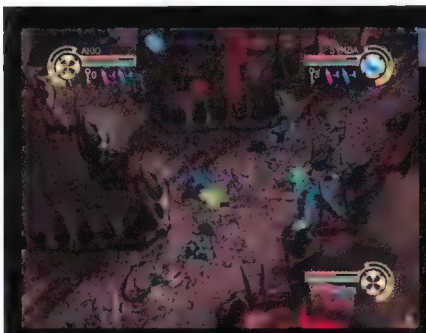
and support, but by proving his worth, as many as 12 allies join the cause to annihilate enemy bases and plant a flag in victory.

For those who want more traditional action over having to deal with complicated troop deployment, Freedom Fighter packs the most appeal: command of your party is simple—exactly what I prefer—relying on the visceral feeling from the visual experience of having a troupe bustling around you. There's an ease of play that may leave the hardcore strategist pining for more control, but that's not the experience Freedom Fighters is aiming for. It's all

a spectacular feeling of being a part of an underground faction of soldiers actually caught in convincing conflict. *-BF*

• **system:** ps2, gc, xbox • **developer:** Io interactive • **publisher:** ea games • **available:** now

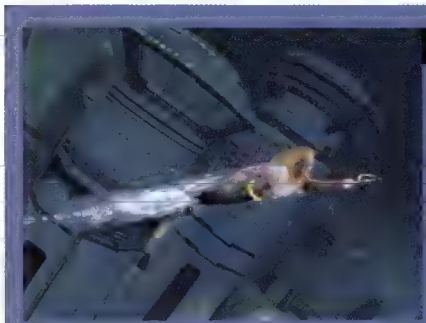
B



Dungeons and Dragons: Heroes

Dungeons and Dragons: Heroes pales next to Dark Alliance 2. I normally wouldn't make such a quick, harsh comparison, but these two games are so much alike in theme and even gameplay structure that Heroes' obvious deficiencies are just that much more damaging. The setup is appealing: pick a fighter, cleric, wizard or rogue and set out to battle creatures from the D&D universe, using magic and weapons to quell the onslaught of forces. The world looks average at best, with the dense atmosphere such a game should have lacking; the art style is flat and dull, compounded by stunted character animation. I liked the general mechanics behind the game well enough, especially in the multiplayer mode, and the light RPG elements are always fun to tinker with, but there are just too many design flaws within the monotony of the dungeon-crawling template. *-BF*

C



Aquaman

as it gets: follow the radar to the bad guys, pummel said villains using a basic array of moves, and move on...and they still couldn't make it fun or even nice-looking. The submarine missions (if you last that long) aren't so bad, but they're no life preserver. DC continues its roll as the single most

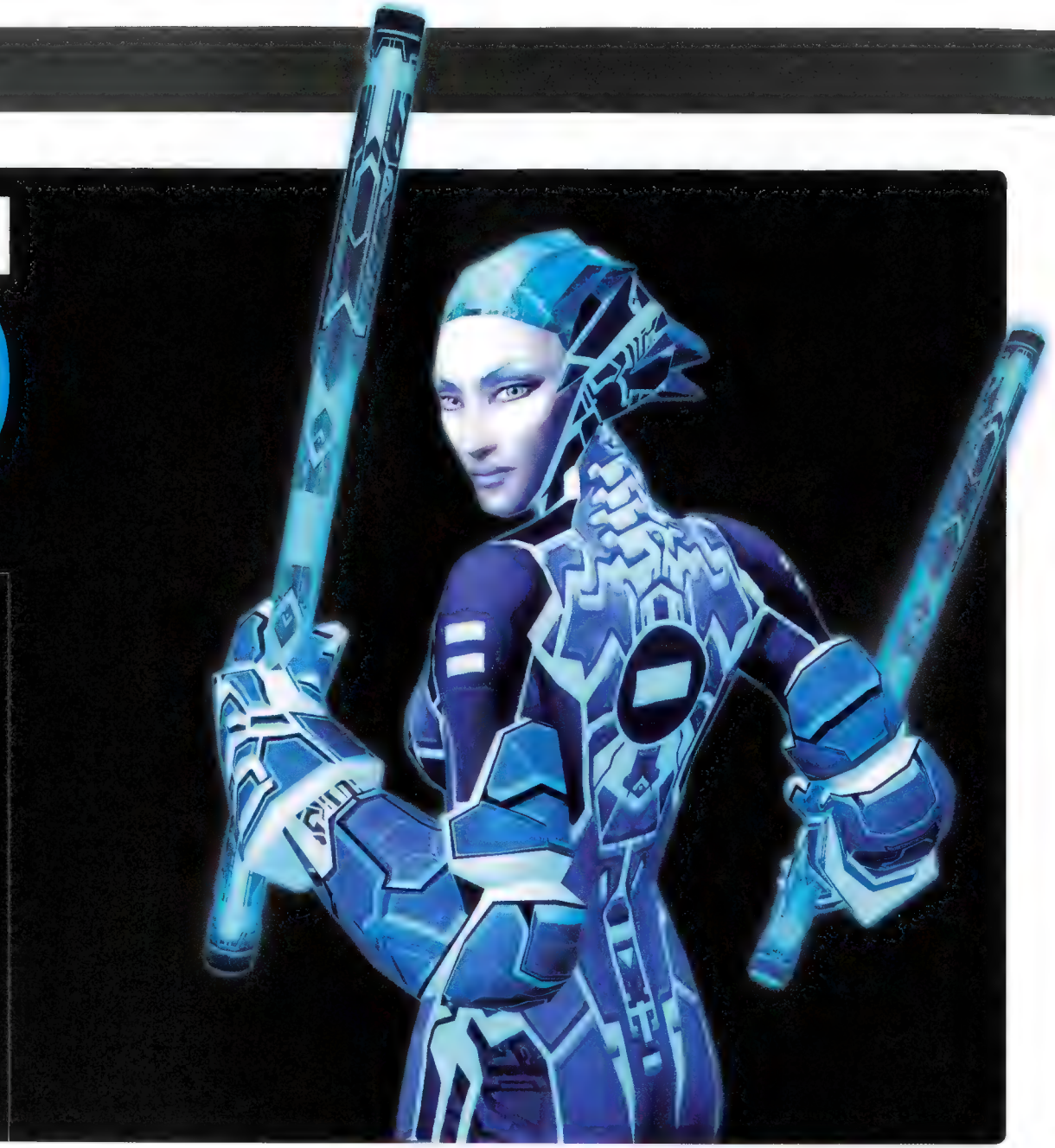
• **system:** xbox • **developer:** lucky chicken • **publisher:** tdk • **available:** now

D

TRON 2.0

User friendly

system: pc
developer: monolith
publisher: buena vista interactive
available: now



words dave halverson

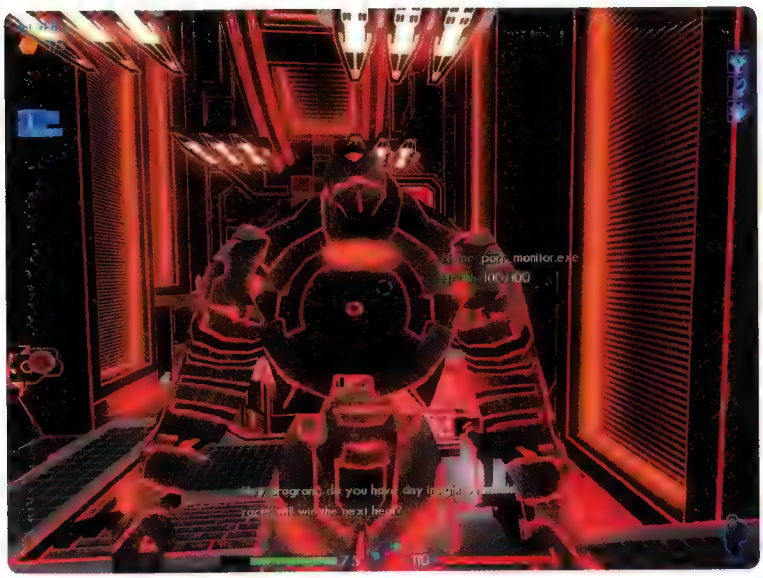
First-person shooters have become all too predictable, fitting neatly into three categories: war, action-adventure and straight shooters. All that remains to set a given game apart boils down to subject matter, graphics and, with any luck, a dose of originality, which in my estimation has been hard to come by. I mean, a mission is a mission, right? Shoot to kill, find whatever it is you're looking for, and claim your prize: new, increasingly cooler environments.

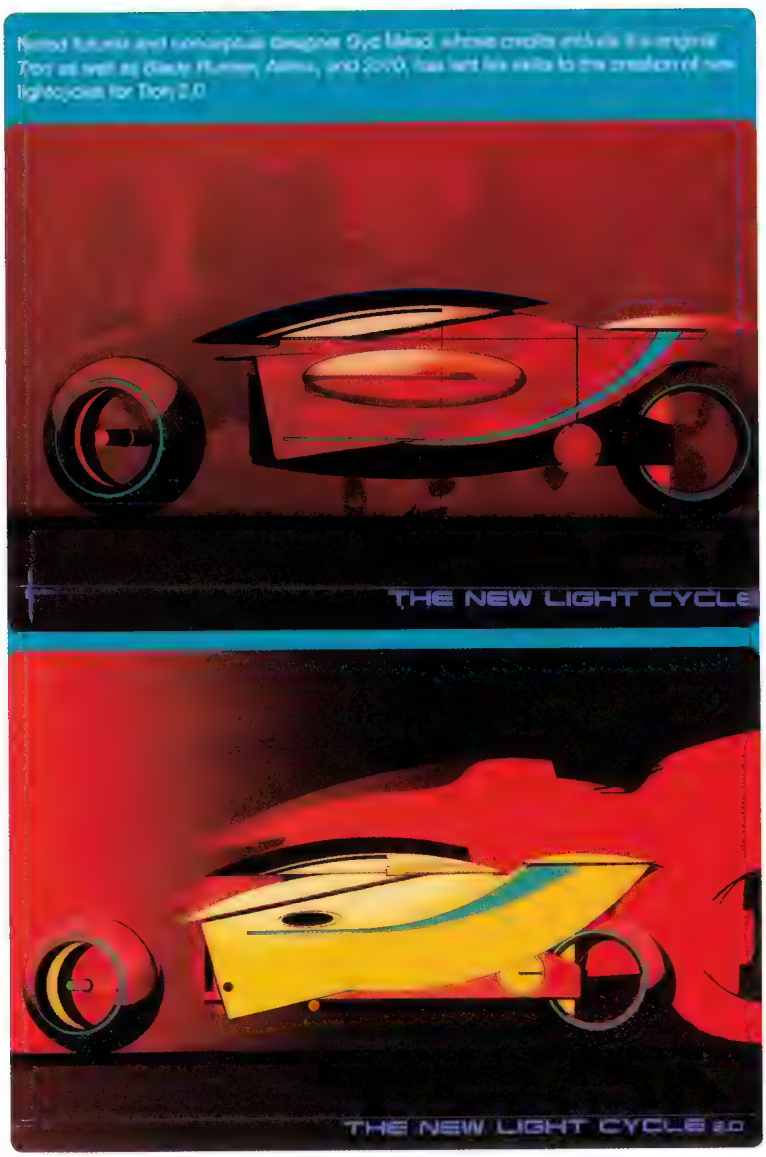
So then, the challenge becomes applying a veneer to said drudgery so fresh that you don't realize you're being lead down the same path, and that's exactly what Monolith has done with TRON 2.0—the single most addicting FPS I've played on PC. Granted, I'm not Mr. PC, but I do take all of the biggies for a ride.

Set 20 years after the endearing original, you play the part of the user, Jet Bradley, a game programmer downloaded into cyberspace while investigating the sudden disappearance of his father, Alan (played by Bruce Boxleitner, reprising the role), creator of the TRON program. Evildoers (they're everywhere, you know) intend on using the human digitization technology his dad created—of which they have both fallen victim—to take over the world's computer systems, so it's time to make like Norton and clean house…or be erased.

The initial feeling in the first mission is one of uncanny newness. I can't remember ever being so quickly immersed or captivated by a world. You feel foreign, intrigued, and wanting to learn about your new surroundings. The amalgam of new old-school graphics, cyber-terminology and the situations that the universe affords converge on your senses, jacking you in like a sixth sense as you become the ghost in the shell.

Mission-based first-person shooting—the heart of the game—gets a major boost from the towering neon architecture that Monolith so masterfully brings up to spec—the game is absolutely gorgeous—but moreover, the operations themselves are like nothing





you've ever experienced. Although you are going through the same motions, it feels completely new. The brunt of the action is spent dispatching foes (but not friendlies; unauthorized deletion is strictly prohibited), searching for "Permission" to breach new environments, and scanning Archive Bins containing the three building blocks of gameplay: subroutines to de-frag and fine-tune Jet's attributes, emails that help unravel the events surrounding the corruption, and the aforementioned Permission, the key to moving through the system. You're essentially exploring—looking for programs to unlock more programs to penetrate the system—which sounds common enough but just...isn't. Supported by a disc battle system (used to throw, arc, block and melee) that is satisfying to a fault, enemies and NPCs that are eerily intelligent, and an overall interface that borders on perfection, the game would be wicked cool even if you never straddled a light cycle...but you do, and man, is it great, both to see and feel.

Once you hit the light-cycle arena and the whole side story it affords, well, get comfortable. Your all-new Syd Mead-designed light cycle lays down the killer glow, and you get fans! Not to mention, you get rescued by Mercury (Rebecca Romijn Stamos...digitized), a sleek, sexy mole with you on the brain. Welcome to your own private matrix. See you on the outside...maybe. **A-**

"The initial feeling in the first mission is one of uncanny newness. I can't remember ever being so quickly immersed or captivated by a world."

The Lord of the Rings
War of the Ring

A real-time strategy game set in Middle Earth

words tom ham

system: pc
developer: liquid entertainment
publisher: vivendi universal games
available: winter 2003

With all the hype and excitement surrounding the December release of the final movie in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, it goes without saying that anything LOTR-related is going to raise a lot of interest. And while most companies are sticking to proven formulas such as RPG or action/adventure, Vivendi Universal Games is also trying something we haven't seen yet: real-time strategy.

The Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring is developed by industry veterans Liquid Entertainment, no strangers to the RTS genre. They were responsible for the awesome Battle Realms, and the project is headed by Ed Del Castillo, who was the producer on the original Command & Conquer and Red Alert. Just speaking with Castillo assured me that the War of the Ring is in more than capable hands. "*The Lord of the Rings* is partly one of the reasons why I'm in game development," explains Del Castillo. "[They were] the first fantasy books I ever read. It launched me into D&D which launched me into my gaming geekdom which launched me into video games. It was a pretty awesome day for me when Vivendi Universal [asked] if Liquid wanted to make a Lord of the Rings RTS game. We've been working on this game since March of 2002 and it's been a great experience bringing the Tolkien works into an RTS setting."

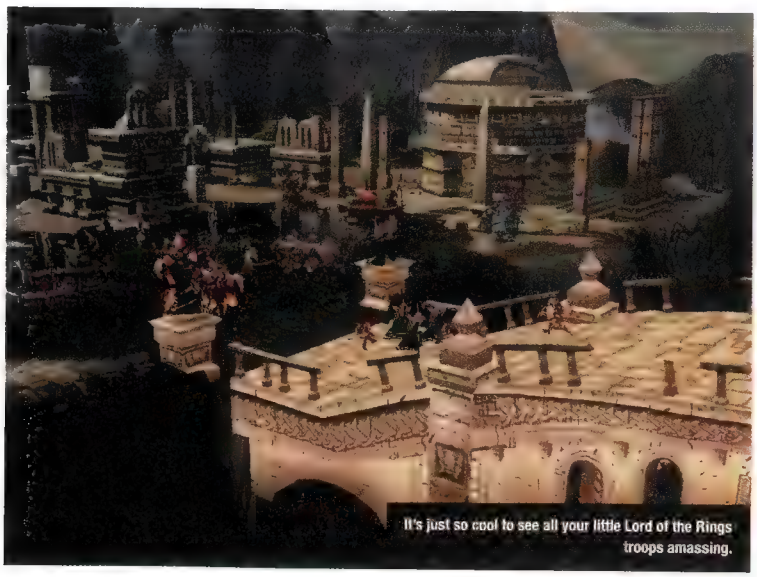
War of the Ring looks to have all the characteristics necessary for a solid RT title. Players will be required to gather resources, construct bases and, of course, build up their units. In addition, the player will be able to control all the major heroes from the books including Legolas, Aragorn, Gimli and Borormir. "War of the Ring is going to be an epic RTS," continues Del Castillo. "We are allowing for hundreds of units on the screen at one time, so you can imagine how incredible the battles are going to be. We want players who haven't played an RTS to play War of the Ring, so we've done away with micro-management. We're incorporating a new resource system which allows players to concentrate more on the battles." And because VU Games has the rights to the literary works of Tolkien, you can expect that most of the battles will be based on actual conflicts from the books.

But what I admired most about Del Castillo is that he isn't about slapping on the Tolkien license to a sub-par game and then releasing it. His team is making sure that this is a true Lord of the Rings experience and that anyone who is a fan, gamer or not, will get into War of the Ring and receive the same amount of thrill and excitement. "To appeal to the broadest range of Tolkien-ites, we've taken the multiplayer and single player and we view them very, very differently. Even though the units are the same in both game styles, players are going to get two different experiences. On the multiplayer side, the gameplay is intense and fast, just like RTS games are supposed to be. On the single-player side, we have a lot of backstory; we took a History Channel approach to the Tolkien universe. Players will not only understand why things are happening, but whom, where and how."

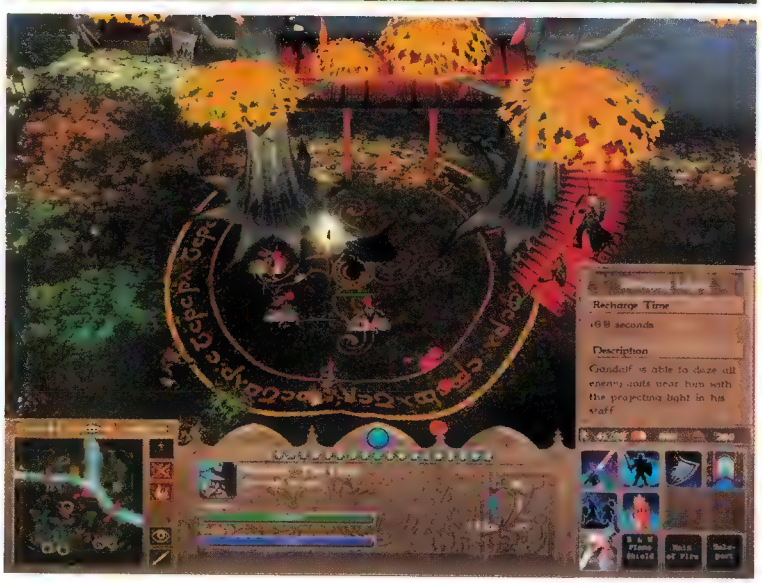
Taking place during the Third Age of Middle Earth, War of the Ring allows players to play the game from both a Good side and an Evil side. Choosing the Good fight, players will experience the events which led up to the formation of the Fellowship and take place in some epic battles that occurred during the Ring quest. The Dark side's story will follow Sauron after his escape from Dol Guldur during the reformation of his armies in Mordor. Players will be able to control Orcs, Trolls and the Haradim.

> "On the single-player side, we have a lot of backstory; we took a History Channel approach to the Tolkien universe."

The visuals in War of the Ring are simply awesome. The individual units have distinct animations and some of the cool spell effects have got to be seen to be believed. When Ed summoned the Balrog, the whole screen shook as it walked. Liquid is known for little details, so it was nice to see trees sway in the wind, high grasses part as units walked through them and birds fly out of trees when you approached; it was all too cool. Tolkien would be proud. **play**

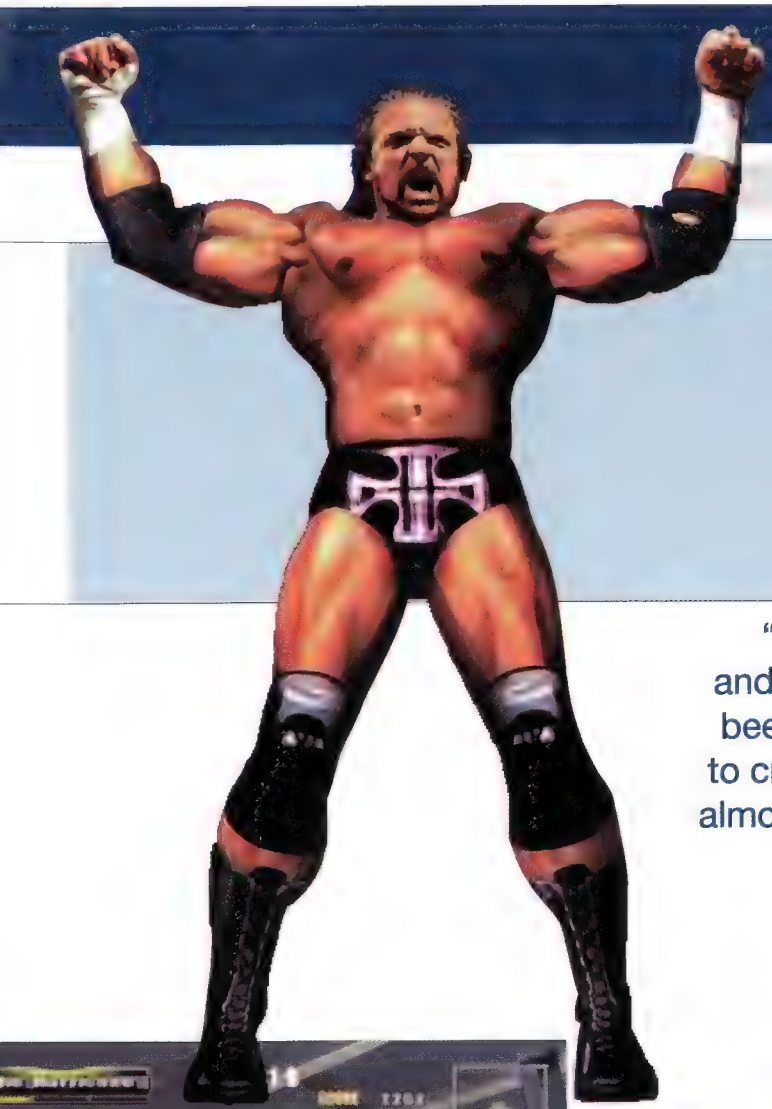


It's just so cool to see all your little Lord of the Rings troops amassing.



WrestleMania XIX

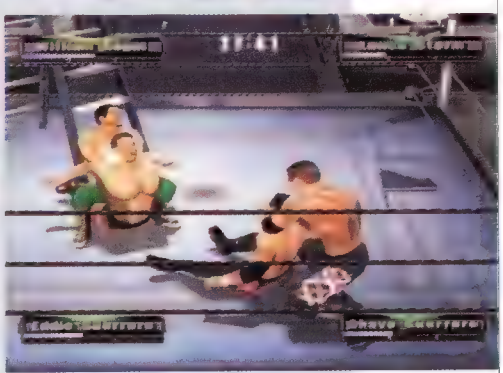
A very good wrestling sim, but there's still room for improvement



system gamecube
developer yuke's
publisher thq
available now

"It seems that THQ and Yuke's really have been paying attention to criticisms...because almost all of XIX is new and improved."

WrestleMania XIX recreates the madness of the 30-man over-the-top-rope Royal Rumble better than any video game in recent memory.



WrestleMania is hyped as the best that pro wrestling has to offer; it's the Super Bowl, the World Series and the NBA finals all rolled into one, combined with guys in tights, for the ultimate sports-entertainment spectacular. So does WrestleMania XIX, the latest game based on said pay-per-view, live up to this hype? Well, no. But it does a good job trying.

It seems that THQ and Yuke's really have been paying attention to criticisms levied at last year's underwhelming X8, because almost all of XIX is new and improved. The grappling system has been thoroughly redone, resulting in a deep engine that borrows from the best of the genre. Both strong lock-ups and faster, weaker takedowns from the ready are available, along with striking moves, providing more strategy than I've experienced in a WWE game in years. These sim-like mechanics are further strengthened by an effective and fair reversal system that becomes both graceful and fun once you master it. Other simple elements that have been lacking recently, like the ability to position opponents, are also found here, enhancing the enjoyment that much more.

As fans know, however, the action is only part of the package. Much of wrestling's appeal lies in the presentation and atmosphere, and here XIX has both pros and cons. The game is visually satisfying, with chiseled models that look fairly impressive, if not exactly realistic. Some character faces, like William Regal, look dead-on, but others, such as the zombified Chris Benoit, are less so. Character-specific crowd chants really enhance the game's energy (and you can finally make any character babyface or heel), yet the game still lacks ring announcing or commentary to complete the package. And I can't quite fathom why THQ can't license the proper music that is each athlete's calling card; some songs, like that of Matt Hardy and Victoria, are just absent.

Naturally, XIX boasts new characters, an improved custom-character mode and the nice range of single- and multiplayer match types that we've come to expect from wrestling updates. But when it comes to the meat of the game, XIX offers up a swerve. Instead of a season mode or the like, XIX features Revenge Mode, a bizarre story mode where you fight in out-of-the-ring venues based on various match types. Rey Mysterio throwing hapless construction workers off buildings? Goldust putting security guards through the roof of a semi truck? Occasionally, camerawork and controls not designed for this type of gameplay result in sheer frustration, but the missions are frequently fun. However, it's more short-term fun, not play-it-all-day fun. Revenge Mode should have been a cool bonus in addition to a career mode, not a replacement. As it is, you'll be done with it in short order and looking for something else to play.

WrestleMania has taken great strides since last year's version. The engine is one of the best, and the presentation is getting there. All it needs is some depth and long-term replayability, and the series could move from contender to main-event attraction. **B**

NBA Live 2004

system: ps2, xbox, gc, pc
developer: ea canada
publisher: ea sports
available: october

"...it appears EA Sports is taking the first step in changing the way we shoot the basketball."

words tom ham

Without a doubt, EA Sports took home the best basketball game last year with their fantastic NBA Live 2003. The introduction of Freestyle control was simply brilliant and it gave the game incredible depth and variety. Not only did it open up the offensive, it improved the defense mechanics as well.

For 2004, it appears EA Sports is taking the first step in changing the way we shoot the basketball. Instead of having just one button that handles the shooting, players will now have two—one for lay-ups/dunks and the other for jump shots. What's really cool is that the game will figure out the best possible shot for you to take given your position in relation to the basket. So if Kobe is right under the basket and you press jump shot, the game will make him do a lay-up. Vice versa on the outside. If you're in three-point range and you press the lay-up/dunk button, the game will automatically step in and try a running one-hander—which, if you think about it, is the only conceivable "lay-up" from that position.

A big complaint of last year's game was that almost every time you shot the ball, it would go in. Whether you were running, fading away or off balance, the ball would go in most of the time. That's not the case for 2004. Since the game is incorporating two distinct shoot buttons, if you happen to hit the wrong one during gameplay and your player attempts to readjust and shoot the ball, more than likely it will not go in. This makes the game much more realistic and will prevent those outrageously high-scoring games.

Dynasty mode has been completely revamped for Live 2004. Players can now import their top college players to the pros. Utilizing the same type of card system used in Madden, players will be able to earn points that can be used to purchase Dynasty Extras such as training sessions, equipment, coaches and facilities. The amount of Dynasty Extras is rather mind-blowing.

Visually, EA Sports has taken it up a few notches. What's new for 2004? How about 10-man mo-cap? Motion capturing 10 players on the court allowed the developers to create authentic team animations that no other game can match. There is actual defense in the game now, so no more run-and-gun with the Freestyle control. You're going to get knocked down. The player models have also been redone from the ground up, and the end result left me crying.

Rounding out the new features for NBA Live 2004 are new announcers Marv Albert and Mike Fratello, EA Sports online competition and, of course, the kicking EA Trax soundtrack.

NBA Shootout 2004

system: ps2
developer: 989 sports
publisher: sony
available: october

"...NBA Shootout 2004 is finally able to play with the big boys."

words tom ham

With an impressive showing with their football game this year, 989 Sports are hoping to do the same thing with their basketball game. Their latest Shootout is showing the signs of a veteran sports game developer and all I have to say—it's about freaking time. With improved AI, tighter controls and retuned graphics, NBA Shootout 2004 is finally able to play with the big boys.

For 2004, 989 are bringing back the brilliant career mode. Here, players can start out in the minor leagues and then progress up through the ranks to hopefully gain entrance into the NBA. No other game even mentions the Summer Pro League and the NBDL. I personally am stoked that this mode has been brought back. Another cool feature is the inclusion of the "50 Greatest Players." All the classic players, from Dr. J to Larry Bird to Pete Maravich, will be unlockable.

Voice recognition has also been implemented in NBA Shootout 2004. Players will be able to call timeouts, reset plays and commit fouls all by the use of their voice. Although the final list of moves hasn't been announced, I suspect it will be around the same amount as GameDay—over 42.

Much like NFL GameDay 2004, NBA Shootout 2004 will have a huge online presence. Utilizing 989 Sports Online, players can go online with up to four others. There will be a tournament mode where up to 64 online players can compete to see who is number one. Downloadable rosters will also be available.

Expanding on last year's game is the improved Freestyle control. Players will be able to execute fast freestyle moves to help them drive to the basket, dubbed "Total Control Jukes." The response time is noticeably quicker than last year's game.

To help make the game more realistic this year, 989 Sports enlisted the help of Chris Webber, Jason Kidd, Robert Horry, Stephon Marbury and Bo Outlaw. These top players offered their insight to plays, defensive AI, offensive movement and ball handling.

Tennis Master Series 2003

system: xbox
developer: microid
publisher: hip games
available: now

"This is, simply put, a great tennis game..."

words dave halverson

No real players...no women's draw...no big deal. This is, simply put, a great tennis game in the vein of Tennis, where it's all about intuitive control and fun. Not that the game is without bells and whistles; they're center court with a whopping 6000 polys per character and 25,000 per stadium (double that of recent competition). The players move in motion-captured glory, reacting instinctively to your every whim, three different times of day are realistically portrayed through real-time lighting, and there are nine eerily reproduced ATP Tournaments to enter, from Indian Wells to Rome, and that's just the tip of the Edberg. Best of all, the nuanced controls are a tennis gamer's net dream, capturing that rarely exhibited connection between player and game. Absolutely the tennis game to beat. Bring on Top Spin! B

NFL Blitz Pro

system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: midway
publisher: midway
available: october

"They've gone the realism route, and the end result is a mixed bag."

words tom ham

For their latest NFL Blitz game, Midway has decided to do something drastic. Something that most Blitz fans won't like. They've gone the realism route, and the end result is a mixed bag.

NFL Blitz Pro has a host of cool gameplay types and features including Exhibition, Season, Practice, Pro-Bowl and a great Franchise mode. Online gameplay has been finally implemented and, for the most part, works out very well. Visually, NFL Blitz never looked better. The player animations are nicely detailed and their animations are equally impressive. Other additions include improved AI, a completely new running game and stat-tracking for every player in the league.

Surprisingly, the 11-on-11 gameplay works rather well. Every team in the NFL is represented along with their respective players. Although it may come as a shock to Blitz fans the first time they play it ("Holy crap, look at all those players!" was my first reaction), after a few plays, I was fine with it. The wacky plays from previous Blitz games have been replaced with more realistic plays; Da Bomb is now called Hail Mary. There are still some Blitz-style plays in the playbooks, but they are no longer the focal point.

The worst aspect of the game has got to be the commentary. Where did they get these clowns? One word: horrible. Midway needs to get Tim Kitzrow back on Blitz and fast! Another sore spot is the load times. Sure they're a bit faster on Xbox, but overall it's ridiculously long.

In the end (and I don't want to admit this), NFL Blitz Pro actually works well. The fast, hard-hitting action we all know and love is still in the game. So if you're looking for a nice alternative to the hardcore sim action of Madden or ESPN, give NFL Blitz Pro a try. B

NBA Inside Drive 2004

system: xbox
developer: high voltage software
publisher: microsoft
available: october

"Xbox owners can finally get their game on over the 'net."

words tom ham

Last year, Microsoft's NBA Inside Drive 2003 was a noble effort, but it still didn't compare to the gameplay of EA's NBA Live. Not only was the presentation style sub-par, the visuals weren't impressive in the least. Sure, it had a decent franchise mode, but overall the game was extremely average.

After playing through a preview version of NBA Inside Drive 2004, I have to say that I'm pleasantly surprised. The developers at High Voltage have really taken their criticisms and have delivered a game that could be a worthy opponent against the mighty EA Sports.

All of the 2004 sports titles from Microsoft now have unique User Profiles. We've seen these types of things before, but not to this level. After players put in their name and vitals, the game will then ask how you like to set up your games: how long you want your quarters to be, if you like to be home or away, your shooting preferences, play setting—it's all customized and saved.

Learning from EA Sports, NBA Inside Drive 2004 has improved their control scheme dramatically over last year's game. Not only are the jukes more responsive on offensive, on defense, players will be able to block and steal more successfully than in the past. In addition, Inside Drive 2004 will incorporate touch-sensitive controls, so how hard you press the button will change how the ball moves in game.

Graphically, the game looks about the same as last year's game—which isn't a good thing or a bad thing. The animations and framerates have been improved, but the overall player models can't match Live 2004.

The biggest improvement to NBA Inside Drive 2004 is the online gameplay on Xbox Live. After dropping the ball and not including it in last year's game, Xbox owners can finally get their game on over the 'net. The typical features are here—roster updates, matchmaking (for head-to-head play) and player ratings. Together with XSNsports.com, players will be able to organize their teams, create leagues and schedule games with friends and other players.

Other key features include Dynasty mode, new camera angels (like drive cam) and, thankfully, much-improved play-by-play commentary.

NHL Hitz Pro

system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: midway
publisher: midway
available: now

"I truly love this game. It has everything a hockey fan could want."

words tom ham

Continuing with their new sports initiative, Midway's brilliant NHL Hitz is now NHL Hitz Pro and with it comes a more simulation-style hockey game that is not only fun as hell, it is far superior to any of their previous hockey titles. Next to EA's NHL 2004, NHL Hitz Pro is my favorite hockey game this year.

For NHL Hitz Pro, the game will now feature full five-on-five gameplay, complete with NHL rules and regulations. Yes, penalties will be given, but for Hitz Pro, Midway has utilized a Referee Meter. Basically, the dirtier you play (late hits, behind the back, slashing, etc.), the faster your meter will fill up until eventually you're called for a penalty. Other features include online gameplay (only on PS2), Hockey School, 23 player rosters, authentic arenas, line changes and more realistic stick handling. Now, if you're an NHL Hitz fan and you're worried that the game will be too sim-like, don't worry. It still plays like last year's NHL Hitz—extremely fast and hard hitting. Play-by-play commentary is courtesy of Tim Kitzrow and Harry Tienowitz, and they've never [illegible]

Unexpectedly deep and robust, the Franchise mode in NHL Hitz Pro lets you build a dynasty and manage every aspect of your team. Players will be able to get new equipment, improve team attributes, unlock teams and many other hidden items. Hockey fans will appreciate that all equipment is officially licensed from brands such as Bauer, Itech and Easton.

Visually, NHL Hitz Pro has been completely overhauled and it truly looks spectacular. The action never slows down for an instant and some of the new checking animations will surly make you cringe. The goalie animations have been improved as well, along with new contextual animations that have been incorporated for some of the new stick shots.

I truly love this game. It has everything a hockey fan could want. From the improved animations to the great Franchise mode to the great Pick Up and Play mode, NHL Hitz Pro is a necessary purchase. A

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004

system: ps2, gc, xbox, gba
developer: ea sports
publisher: electronic arts
available: now

"The level of customization is simply astounding."

words tom ham

It goes without saying what an impact EA Sports has made on the industry with their venerable Tiger Woods PGA Tour golf series. With each new version, EA Sports always seems to surprise us with some wickedly cool feature that blows us away, and their latest continues this trend.

In addition to an ambitious online presence, Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004 is introducing the EA Sports Game Face. We've seen Create-A-Player before, but not to this extent. The goal of EA Sports Game Face is for players to build an incredibly detailed version of themselves and then go [illegible] against Tiger Woods and the PGA Tour. The level of customization is simply astounding. In addition to the typical options like face, hair color, eye color and facial hair, players can change the structure of their cheek, chin and jaws. And not just the appearance, but the width, height and length too. Other details like brow height, mouth size and shape, ears size and shape, body types, and even foot size are included as well. Quite frankly, there is no reason why anyone couldn't re-create their own image in the game. It's that good. What's also cool is that whoever you play online will be able to see the Game Face you created.

A deep Career mode is also in the game, where players can play in the 52-week-long PGA Tour calendar for up to ten seasons. The better you play in Career mode, the more sponsorships you'll acquire, and with more sponsorships comes cool free stuff such as clothing and equipment.

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004 has seven new courses that push the course count to an impressive 19. There are five new pros in the game, including John Daly and Adam Scott. Together with Tiger, the 15 other PGA Tour pros and the returning original characters from last year's game, the total number of players is over 32.

And if you think you're worthy, you can hit the course online and play peer to peer with anyone across the country. Supporting voice-over IP, players can chat in real time with their opponent. There will be full stat tracking as well, so players will be able to see leaderboards and check out who the best player is. What's really cool is that EA Sports will have official [illegible] where they will compete not only for prizes, but for cold hard cash. A

database

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Madden NFL 2004 *ea / ps2*
02	Soul Calibur II *namco / gc*
03	Madden NFL 2004 *ea / xbox*
04	F-Zero GX *nintendo / gc*
05	Silent Hill 3 *konami / ps2*
06	Simpsons Road Rage *ea / ps2*
07	Futurama *vivendi universal / ps2*
08	Ghost Recon: IT *ubi soft / xb*
09	Mario Golf: TT *nintendo / gc*
10	Star Wars: KoToR *lucas arts / xb*

Top Sellers Overall (July)

01	NCAA Football 2004 *ea / ps2*
02	Star Wars: KoToR *lucas arts / xb*
03	NCAA Football 2004 *ea / xb*
04	DragonBall Z: Goku II *atari / gba*
05	Donkey Kong Country *nintendo / gba*
06	Pokemon Ruby *nintendo / gba*
07	Grand Theft Auto 3 *rockstar / ps2*
08	Pokemon Sapphire *nintendo / gba*
09	Yu-Gi-Oh Worldwide *konami / gba*
10	GTA: Vice City *rockstar / ps2*

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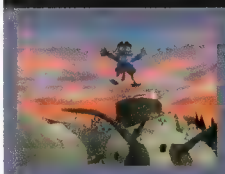
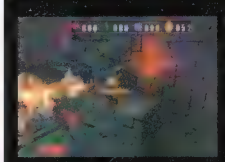


Blinx *microsoft / xbox*
Blinx has gone silver so now [illegible] one of the decade's most



Wario World *nintendo / gc*
One of the best pure action experiences you can have on GameCube, Treasure's Wario World is packed with crazy bosses, manic gameplay and amazing worlds.

Guilty Gear X2 *atlus / ps2*
When you tire of playing Soul Calibur 2 (if that's possible) give the ultimate in 2D fighting a try. Atlus' Guilty Gear X2 stands as one of the most beautiful hand-drawn fighters ever created.

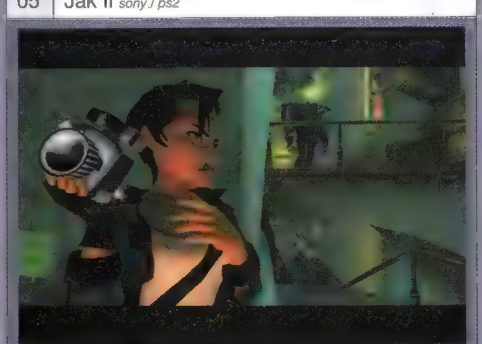
staff and reader selections

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	Final Fantasy X-2 *square enix / ps2*
02	Gran Turismo 4 *sony / ps2*
03	Metal Gear Solid 3: SN *konami / ps2*
04	Sonic Heroes *sega / ps2, gc, xb*
05	Resident Evil 4 *capcom / gc*

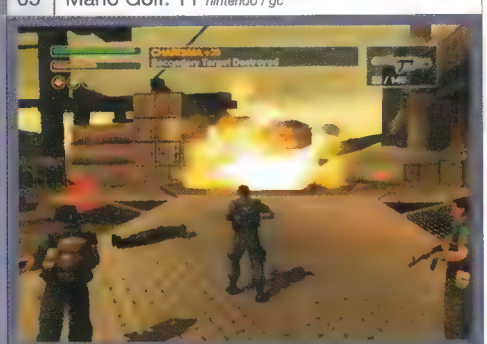
Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Beyond Good and Evil *ubi soft / ps2*
02	Voodoo Vince *microsoft / xb*
03	Viewtiful Joe *capcom / gc*
04	Castlevania: Lol *konami / ps2*
05	Jak II *sony / ps2*



Bradley Fiechter executive editor

01	Freedom Fighters *ea / ps2*
02	Fatal Frame 2 *tecmo / ps2*
03	Soul Calibur II *namco / gc*
04	Madden 2004 *ea / ps2*
05	Mario Golf: TT *nintendo / gc*



Chris Hoffman some editor

01	Mega Man Zero 2 *capcom / gba*
02	Castlevania: Lol *konami / ps2*
03	Soul Calibur II *namco / ps2*
04	Suikoden III *konami / ps2*
05	Double Dragon Advance *atlus / gba*

Michael Hobbs art director

01	Final Fantasy XI Online Beta *square enix / pc*
02	F-Zero GX *nintendo / gc*
03	Mario Golf: TT *nintendo / gc*
04	Soul Calibur II *namco / gc*
05	R-Type Final *irem / ps2*

Tom Ham sports editor

01	Madden NFL 2004 *ea / pc*
02	NBA Live *ea / pc*
03	Medal of Honor: Breakthrough *ea / pc*
04	Need for Speed Underground *ea / ps2*
05	Jedi Knight: JA *lucas arts / pc*

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Ninja Scroll

Kawajiri breaks out the mad skills, once again

studio urban vision
rating 17 & up
running time 90 minutes
available now

words dave halverson

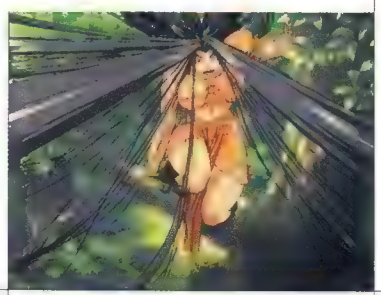
Patient we have been; long we have waited. After nearly a decade, the true follow-up to the legendary *Ninja Scroll*, from the original makers, is finally here, and if nothing else, one fact remains: no one does demons better than Kawajiri.

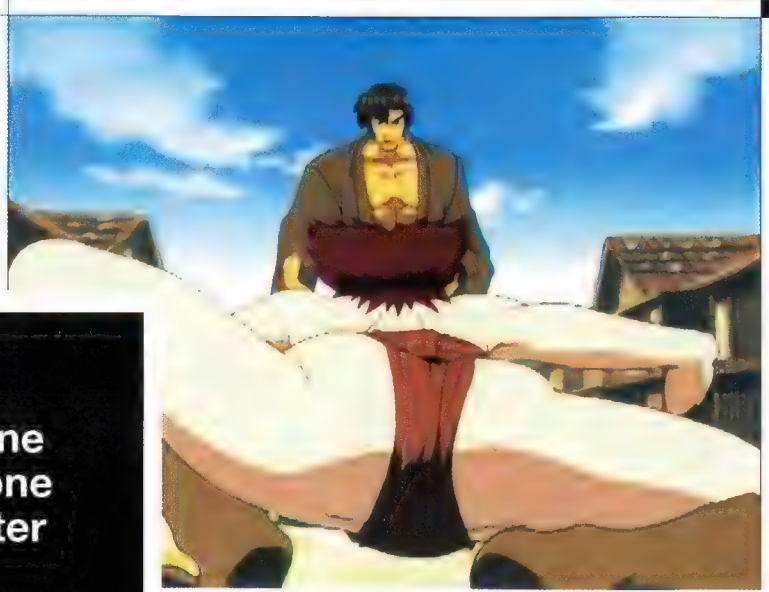
As it should be, the story, which unravels sometime after the original, is a simple one. We find Jubei, his usual jovial self, traveling the countryside, a ninja mercenary for hire, wanting nothing more than a good night's sleep. Settling in under a vast moonlit field for some rest, his siesta is rudely interrupted as a fight breaks out in a nearby forest between a Hiruko ninja and two extremely nasty demon attackers. The Hiruko has stolen the sacred Dragon Stone, vowing to deliver it to his people to free them from a life of darkness—a noble endeavor. Unfortunately for him, however, the Kimon clan want it too, only they have a naked, pale-white, Amazon female that spawns flesh-eating slugs and has a psychic friend that mutates out of her shoulder...ninjas check in but they don't check out.

Whoever gets the Dragon Stone and the Light Maiden together will hold the power of the Toyotomi and the treasure it hides, and that, ladies and gentlemen, is your story; let the fray begin. After Jubei minces said demon from hell, along with her equally grotesque comrade, the Hiruko, in defeat, entrusts the stone to Jubei, along with his dying wish that Jubei deliver it to the Light Maiden. Soon enough, he crosses paths with the always-entertaining Dakuan, ancient fart extraordinaire (as powerful as he is unsightly, and one of few returning characters), Tsubute, a lowdown, heartless thief, and naturally the lovely Shigure, the Light Maiden, who finds her way to Jubei after the village she's called home since birth is decimated and everyone she knows killed.

War and peace this is not, but the most skillfully laid demon action series this may very well be. Each and every demon the Kimon send forth is a marvel of design, a major accomplishment in a genre inundated with stereotypical monsters. Now we know what Kawajiri has been up to the last decade; his demon mech genuinely disturbed me, mowing down man, woman and child—a blank, thoughtless, killing machine. The guy just makes insane monsters, end of story.

The other high point of the new series is the production itself, which blows typical series anime out of the water. A bevy of techniques are utilized, and the animation is, of course, skillfully balanced, but the cinematography is where it really shines. Served between signature Kitaro theme songs, this is to ninja action what *Evangelion* is to sci-fi. I only wish they'd left the composer interviews on the cutting room floor. Kitaro looks like he just woke up, he's off-center, a guy runs in front of the camera, and they didn't even bother to translate. The Peter "Peas" McEvilley piece, though, takes the proverbial cake. After initially calling it "Ninja Scrolls," the clueless interviewer (these are by far the worst questions I have ever heard) follows with such queries as "you use many different styles, how come that is?" Jubei ought to have at him next. A





"If nothing else, one fact remains: no one does demons better than Kawajiri."

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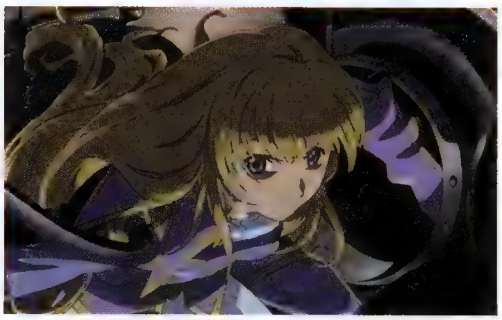
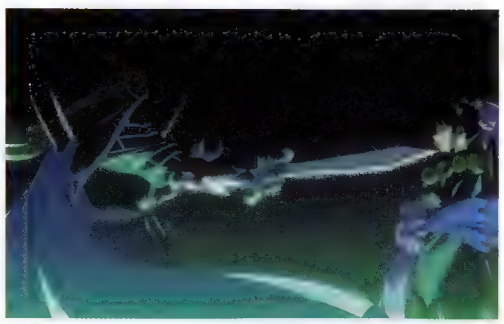
Sakura Wars Movie

Production I.G takes the Imperial Flower Division to a whole new level





studio pioneer animation
rating 13 & up
running time 85 minutes
available now

words christina alexander

With a successful TV series, two OVAs and some wildly popular Sega games on which they're based, *Sakura Wars* has continually shown its undeniable charm, quirky storytelling and incredible staying power in a time when competition from other anime is positively fierce.

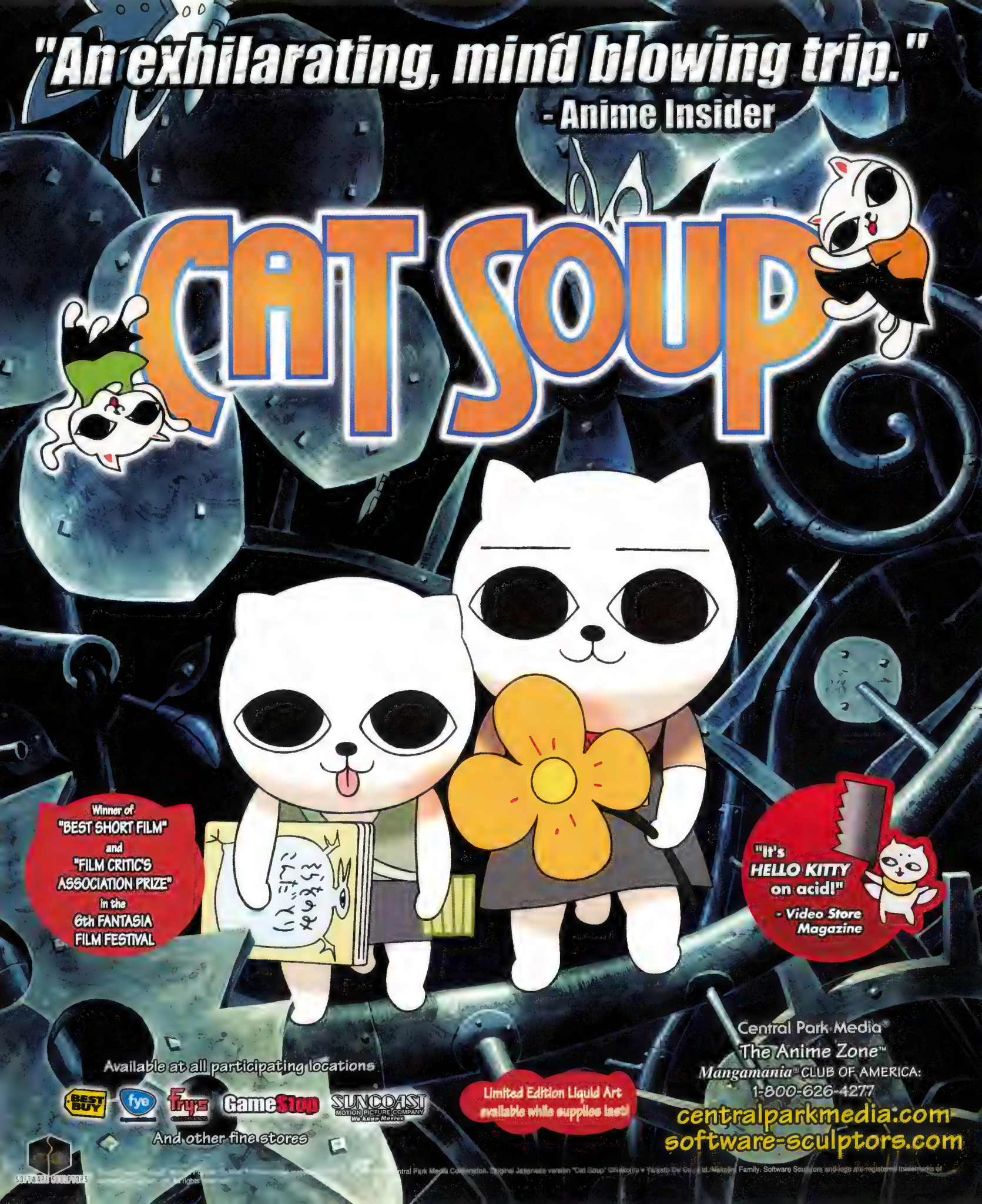
It's Christmas time in Tokyo, and while the season may be jolly, the Imperial Fighting Troupe has considerable cause for worry. Even though the brave and beautiful ladies of the Flower Division have proved their worth many times over, technology always moves forward. A rival group has developed a new fighting machine that just may put our favorite steam-powered fighters out of a job. But there's something that's just not quite right about these newcomers, as their arrival strangely coincides with the disappearance of some of the members of the Flower Division.

With the success of the series, it was only a matter of time before a *Sakura Wars* movie appeared on the horizon. In their attempts to present *SW* to the fans in true grand movie fashion, the production committee made the all-important decision to add the formidable skills of Production I.G to this project. And boy, did that decision pay off. Looking back at previous works like *Blood* and *Ghost in the Shell*, it's simply a given that anything Production I.G touches turns to gold. And this definitely holds true with the *SW* movie.

It's almost impossible to describe the jaw-dropping visuals that Production I.G has created. Almost. From the time the opening credits appear, it's apparent that this movie was created with the flair and passion that only the best of the best can bring to bear.

The story is captivating. The backgrounds take your breath away, and the animation proceeds with a delicate grace that makes you want to abuse the rewind button. If you thought the funky Flower Division mechs were incredible before, just wait till you get a peek at them now. Behold, the power of steam!

"It's almost impossible to describe the jaw-dropping visuals that Production I.G has created."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Witch Hunter Robin

words dave halverson

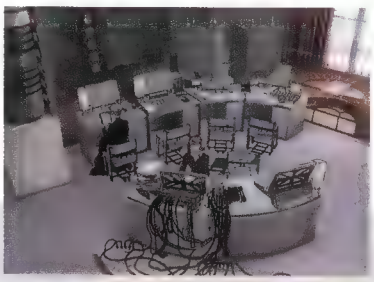
It was a bittersweet occasion when the credits rolled on the final episode of *Hellsing*, partly because it was over but more so because I knew it would be a long while until something came along in the same vein as good. Turns out, it was a short wait. Not to say that these shows are identical, but there are parallels. The Hellsing organization hunted vampires; the STNJ hunts witches and warlocks. *Hellsing* began with a new recruit, Seras Victoria; *Witch Hunter Robin* starts with a new recruit, Robin Sena. Both shows utilize subtle hues for a melancholy effect and mix CG with digital animation, and in both it took one to know one: Arucard was a powerful vampire; Robin is a powerful witch—an old-school craft user in a technological world.

The secret organization formed to handle paranormal elimination, the STNJ (an arm of "The Factory"), doesn't kill witches; they stun them with a proprietary gun technology called Orbo, and then entomb them in a form of cryogenic chamber. The organization is lead by Zaizen, a chiseled executive with nerves of steel and a dry demeanor who has assembled an eclectic band, not unlike that of a typical serial crime drama, to rid the world of its wicked underbelly. Amon is the reserved, brooding leader, although his actual powers remain a mystery (he uses Orbo exclusively in Volume 1); Haruto Sakai is the reckless rookie taken under Amon's wing; Miho Karasuma is a craft-user like Robin, specializing in psychometry (the ability to sense residual thought through touch); Yurika Dojima is the token carefree rich girl from an influential family, hunting for thrills; Michael Lee is the sole mortal and the company hacker (caught breaking into the system, rather than convicting him, they put him to work under house arrest); Robin is the new blood, called in six months after the STNJ's first fatality. Robin's craft is fire, which is powerful, although her aim leaves much to be desired.

Character development throughout episodes 1-5 is carried out with the utmost savvy, setting the stage for the layers of story that lie in wait, such as Amon's apparent inner demons and his acceptance of Robin, or lack thereof. A very solid story is developing, interlaced with serious witch hunting, adorned with frighteningly real ritualistic regalia, top-notch HQ banter and an overall production that exudes anime's newfound polish. The CG/animation mixture is well matched, and the neo-retro tech applied to phones, computers, PDAs and even storefronts is superb.

There's something darkly poetic and powerful about same-species hunting; *Hellsing* had it too. At the end of the day, these are witches hunting witches, sending them to a seemingly tortured lucid death. The only thing that sets them apart is either a respect or loathing of humanity, a wormhole ripe for investigation. **B+**

"Character development throughout episodes 1-5 is carried out with the utmost savvy, setting the stage for the layers of story that lie in wait..."



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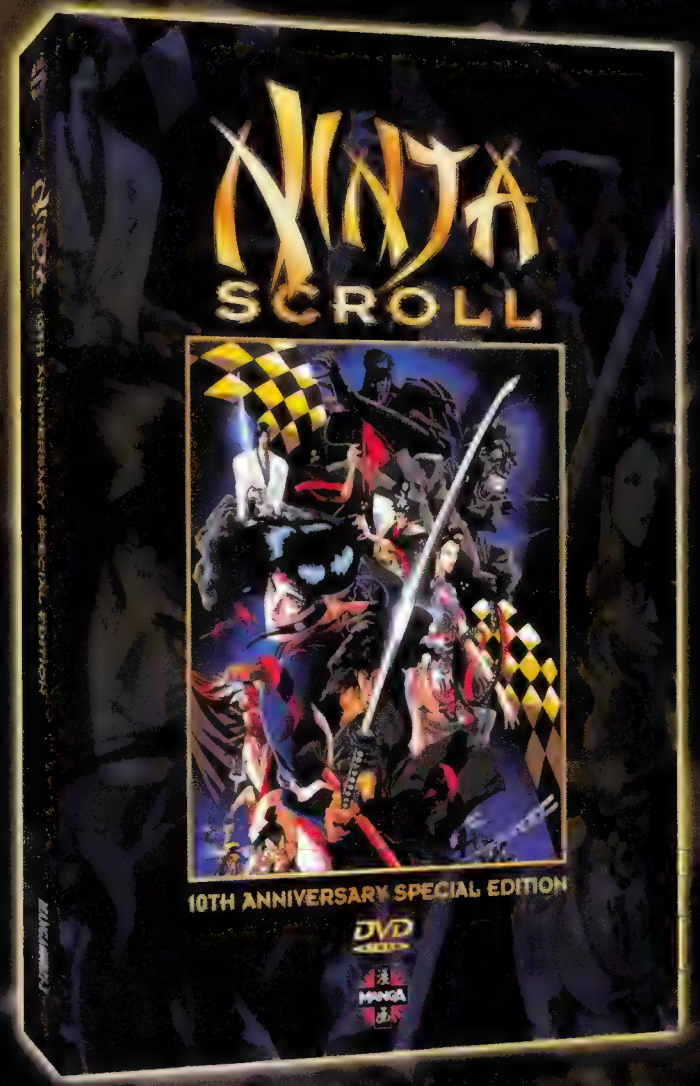

"Mixing the mystical with the fantastic, the film draws you into its universe of Freudian clans and ancient rivalries"
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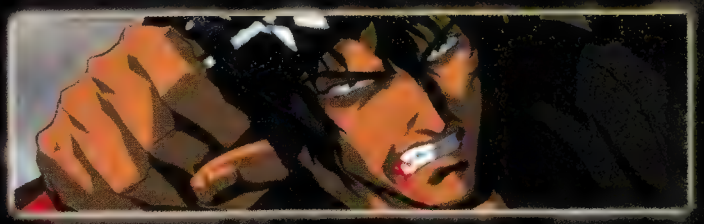

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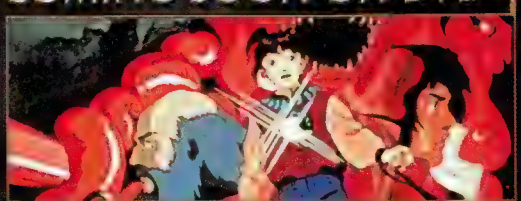

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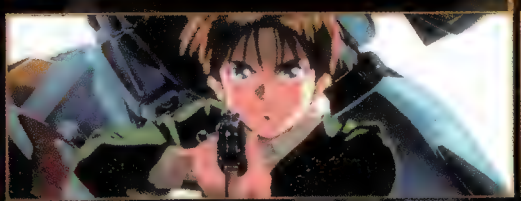

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Infinite Ryvius

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Two brothers—Yuki the consummate slob, brooding and cruel, and Kouji, studious and honorable—are lost in space, on a crash course with forces they can't comprehend and a gravitational anomaly that knows only silent, painful death. Welcome to *Infinite Ryvius*.

After populating the far reaches of the solar system, man's love affair with space came to an abrupt halt when a sun flare decimated the galaxy, leaving in its wake a dense plasma called the Sea of Geduld, which has rendered space travel (as common as our current freeways or air travel) nearly impossible due to its incinerating heat and crushing G-force. As the years pass, man begins to come to terms with the phenomena, training young cadets to navigate around it at the Liebe Delta Astronaut Training Center...space camp circa 2225 AD, where Yuki and Kouji have just been accepted.

During a routine dive procedure into the Geduld, saboteurs, after a mysterious force hidden within the massive space station, attack, and when the dust settles the instructors and adult crew are all lost, leaving 487 students at the mercy of government terrorists, the incinerating Geduld, and scariest of all, their own devices. With only their wits to guide them, small factions of the ship's youth begin to take measures, and in a *Lord of the Flies* meets *Titanic* vein, one of the most engaging anime series in recent years begins to unfold in somewhat uncharacteristic fashion. If ever there has been an anime series geared for a western audience, *Infinite Ryvius* is it. Honed to miniseries perfection, superb character development, love triangles, sibling rivalry and a plausible science fiction core are wrapped in a gorgeously produced package stocked with impeccable character designs and sky-high production values.

Bandai's been hyping *Robin*, as they should, but *Infinite Ryvius* is just as good, if not better. Combined with *Argentosoma* and *Geneshaft*, they form this year's quad force in series anime.

"...impeccable character designs and sky-high production values."

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Perfect and feminine perfection paired

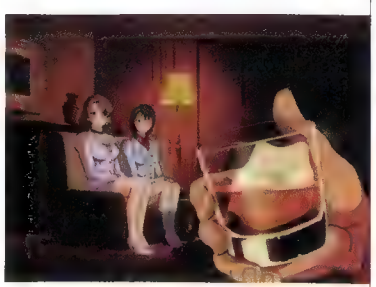
words dave halverson

If you like *Gunsmith Cats, Noir, Dirty Pair* and panty shots—lots and lots (and then some more) panty shots—say hello to *Najica Blitz Tactics*, a scratch-and-sniff adventure! Okay, not really, but it may as well be. Loaded with more camel toe than a Pharaoh's motor pool, never has such gratuity been surrounded by so much substance. Najica could hold its own sans massive T&A, but the butt brigade and nipple parade work overtime anyway, serving up a cornucopia of perfectly drawn females fit for the most fastidious anime connoisseur. Noriyasu Yamauchi has a fetish of biblical proportions and is exorcising his demons on the American public. God bless him.

Working under the ruse of a perfume designer for the CRI cosmetics company (the best-smelling top secret espionage facility in Japan, no doubt), super spy and all-around cool chick Najica Hiragi teams up with the unlikeliest of partners to foil high crime of the sexiest kind; think *Alias* meets *Charlie's Angels* (minus an Angel).

Immediately following one of the slickest opening episodes on record, where the lovely panty raider stacks up a record mound of scantily clad g-strung super maids (slumped over in the most compromising positions) while rescuing a young maiden from the clutches of a maniacal lesbian, Najica finds herself with some unwanted baggage that goes by the name of Lila. Lovely Lila is a Humarit (think Replicant, only hotter)—Najica's Humarit: super-human strength in a dainty female shell, only dumb as a stone. What follows is filed in the super-spy handbook under "why the best spies work alone."

Doused in slick digital animation, seriously sexy character design and inspired voice acting—further evidenced by Kira Vincent Davis' (*Najica*) and Monica Rial's (*Lila*) colorful commentary—*Najica* has a little Bond, a lot of babes and proof positive that you can indeed have your cake and eat it too...although it might have some pubes in it. **B**



"Never has such gratuity been surrounded by so much substance."

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Noir - on vol. 5

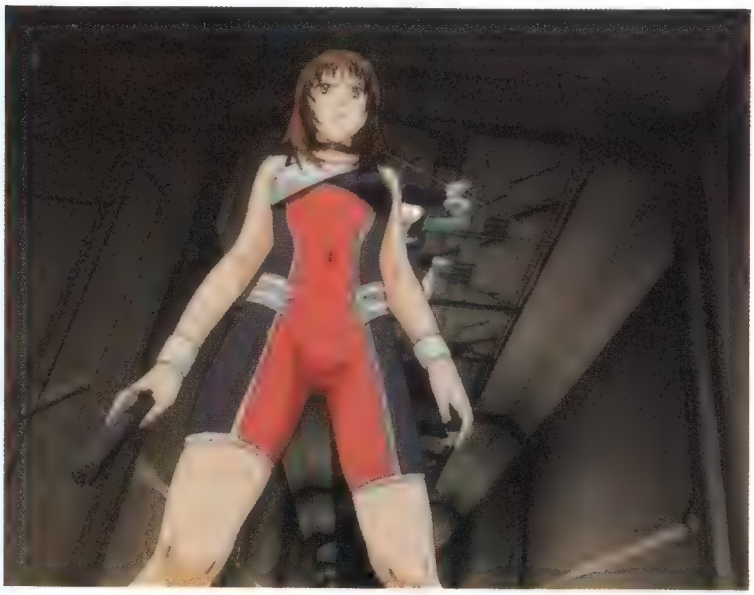
If you thought *Alias* had cliffhangers, think again. *Noir* will drive you crazy, and I'm not about to reveal why, except to say that it will weigh on your heart as much as, if not more than, *Now And Then Here And There*. In Volume 5, events of the past continue to unfold in seriously dramatic fashion as Mireille returns home, setting the scene for more bleak revelations. *Noir* has definitely turned a corner in terms of perspective heading towards the final two volumes, which should be practically heart-stopping. *-DH*

A-

Geneshaft - on vol. 4

Set in a future populated by genetically predisposed humans (mostly women), the mission to assess and destroy the humanity-threatening space anomaly known as Rings continues. A small Ring infiltrates the ship, sucking the crew's blood and stealing away as body doubles to determine the threat level the mission poses, and, of course, steal the Shaft, humanity's only hope for annihilating the Rings. Perhaps they can fix the bugs...perhaps not. *-DH*

B



DNA² - on vol. 2

In *DNA²*, the meek not only inherits the Earth, he overpopulates it! Sent to quell his mating ritual, Karin has zipped 100 years back in time and actually caused it. Worse yet, her attempt at matchmaker has failed miserably, and instead of lusting after his would-be sweetie, Ami, the Mega-Playboy Junta wants Karin. I can't say I blame him, but talk about an age difference. *DNA²* continues to please, though it definitely weighs in on the fruity side—the good fruity side. *-DH*

B-

Saiyuki - on vol. 2

Religion! Chinese lore! American pop-comedy! ADV presents five new episodes much like the first as we ride along to India, hoping to find the root cause of why demons have begun eating folks, delving ever deeper into what brought each member of Team Sanzo to this noble crusade. The rather inspired action from V1 gets even better, as does the crazy banter. *Saiyuki* pours a little of everything right over the top and takes plenty of risks in the process. History has never been so much fun. Viva la difference! *-DH*

B

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Jungle Emperor Leo DVD

Street: 10/28/03 UPC: 6-31595-03372-4 CAT#: AWDVD-0333 SRP: $19.95 99 Minutes

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Spirit Warrior: Revival of Evil

studio: central park media
rating: 16 & up
running time: 49 min
available: now

"...transcends the decade since its Japanese debut, spreading its black wings to envelop a new generation."

words dave halverson

Among the ranks of horror anime, *Doomed Megalopolis* reigns supreme in my book, followed by *Vampire Hunter D Bloodlust*, *Twilight of the Dark Master*, *3X3 Eyes*, and this tender morsel that I caught on video some time ago after someone told me it was based on the Sega Genesis game Mystic Defender; back then it was called *Peacock King*. Aging extremely well against the backdrop of today's digital animation, the hand-animated production of *Madhouse*, combined with Rintaro's direction, transcends the decade since its Japanese debut, spreading its black wings to envelop a new generation.

Spirit Warrior: Revival of Evil is the ultimate struggle between light and dark, because in this case, they are one and the same, residing inside of a single human host—a young exorcist in training unaware that he holds the key to both heaven and hell, in a manner of speaking. We look in as the humble Kujaku, a young man with no past that he's aware of, becomes enlightened, his humble beginnings, dreams and aspirations smashed as he becomes aware of his true self—the pawn in a Neo-Nazi struggle to finish what Hitler started. He alone will decide humanity's fate, and it could go either way, like it or not. If his spirit has been cleansed by the priest that raised him from a child, humanity may survive, but should the slightest hint of darkness reside in his soul, evil will rise again and extinguish the light. Simple enough odds, perhaps, on any given apocalypse, were it not for the emergence of the twin sister he never knew...raised by the Nazis.

At the center of the plight lies the Dragon Orb, the item that became the blight of Hitler's master plan, locked away for centuries, guarded by the priests of Tantric Buddhism. In Volume 1, the orb is finally brought into the light, as are the players in this cruel story, bathed in sub-plots, rich characters and one mean case of sibling rivalry.

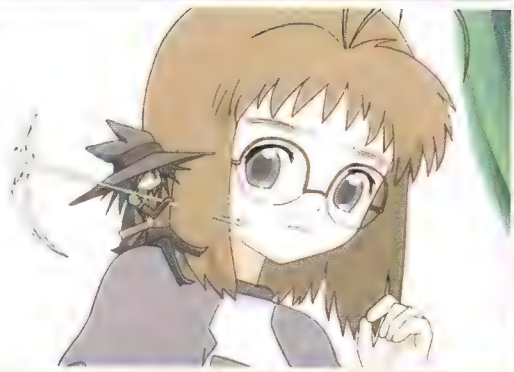
Hitler Part Zwei (one Siegfried von Mittgard) seeks Kujaku's head on a stick so that his sister may possess the orb and pass to him the power to become Regent of Darkness, but Kujaku doesn't plan on going quietly and has some powerful allies by his side—a good story made to shine glossy black with the best bedfellows money can buy. **B+**

Risky Safety

studio: an entertainment
rating: 3 & up
running time: 80 min
available: now

"Some call it dripping with saccharine, but I call it brimming with depth and humor."

words christina alexander



Stop. Before you read any further, you must know that *Risky Safety* may quite possibly be the cutest anime to ever exist on this green (and mildly polluted) earth. But don't let the sugary goodness scare you away. *RS* may be dripping with saccharine, but it contains surprising depth and humor for such a silly-looking title.

When bad things happen, life gets you down, and you are ready to just give up, legend has it that a soul-stealing demon will appear to help you on your way to un-being. With the way Moe-chan's (pronounced MO-AY, not like Larry and Curly's brother) life is going, she has become a prime target for an enterprising demon. After finding out that her boyfriend may have been unfaithful, Moe spirals into deep teenage depression and angst. Right on schedule, a denizen of hell appears to steal her soul. However, the demon, Risky, doesn't look much like a nightmare creature. Standing at only three apples high, Risky's victims are more likely to hug him than run from him. To make Risky's job even harder, he also has to share his body with a kind-hearted but ditzy angel named Safety. Little Safety's job is the direct opposite of Risky's, so the two must constantly battle for control of their shared body.

Getting around the oppressive cuteness may be tough for some, but for those of you who are secure in your man (or woman) hood, *Risky* Safety is a witty and moderately funny divergence from the norm. The secret of its success may be in its mini-episode format. Each portion is no longer than eight minutes long. And as any person who has turned down a Snickers bar then proceeded to plow through an entire bag of the bite-sized snack bars knows, sweet stuff is great in small portions. **B+**

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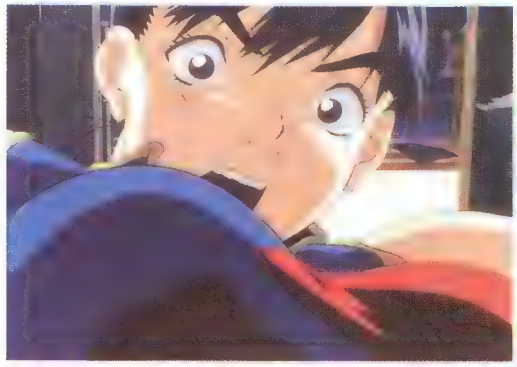
Spirit of Wonder

studio: bandai entertainment
rating: 16 & up
running time: 97 min
available: now

"Don't expect giant transformable robots piloted by adolescents with brightly colored hair."

words christina alexander



Almost everyone has dreamt of going into space. Flying into the outer reaches of the stratosphere. Breaking free of earth's gravity, and travelling to other planets. We just wouldn't be human without some curiosity about the unknown.

The characters in Bandai's new release, *Spirit of Wonder*, are no different. Cooper, Gordon and Sheperd had always dreamt of visiting Mars. Maybe they could even contact new life forms. Who knows? But one thing is for sure. You never know until you try. The three boys decide to indulge their curiosity and form a club called the Scientific Boys Club. And their goal? Get to Mars.

Even as grown men, they never lost their dream, and they never stopped trying. With the mathematical help of Gordon's genius daughter, they push even harder towards their lofty goal.

Spirit of Wonder is most definitely a different and un-anime type of anime. The reverence that the characters show for science and the possibility of space travel draw close parallels with the famous Wings of Honneamise.

Don't expect giant transformable robots piloted by adolescents with brightly colored hair. The character designs are sober (almost boring) and realistic, and the problems that plague the protagonists do not threaten the very existence of the planet earth.

The story is well thought out, but slow in its pacing, and this often makes your fingers twitch towards the fast-forward button. Even though *SoW* mimics *Honneamise*'s general direction, it still lacks its riveting charm. *Spirit of Wonder* is, technically, better than most other titles, but it simply won't keep you coming back for more. **B-**

Dragon Ball Z: Broly the Legendary Super Saiyan

studio: funimation
rating: 13 & up
running time: 70 min
available: now

"...animated flesh and bone is pounded into rock and drilled through mountains. These DBZ boys can take a punch."

words dave halverson

Paragus, champion of the new Saiyan world, has a problem: the new Utopia he has built in Vegeta's honor is in danger. The legendary Super Saiyan ripping through (and apart) the galaxy is heading north, leaving planetary destruction in his wake. Paragus fears that if Vegeta can't stop him, he'll grind New Vegeta to a pulp and then head for Earth. Blinded by arrogance, Vegeta agrees to take up the gauntlet. Of course, Kiaho, all knowing (and all blue), sees to it that Goku follows for support, and so it begins. The stage is set for yet another *DBZ* dramedy/action extravaganza, tongue drilled firmly into cheek.

You can tell from the get-go that Paragus is up to no good, which becomes painfully apparent the second he assigns his son Broly to serve Vegeta, since...er...he's on the box. What's not apparent, however, is what drove father and son to such bitter extremes; and it ain't pretty. Once Goku and the alleged Super Saiyan's secret past is revealed, things begin to unravel rapidly (in between Goku acting like a complete moron), leading to a classic *DBZ* battle where animated flesh and bone is pounded into rock and drilled through mountains. These *DBZ* boys can take a punch. Thankfully, Roshi is along for the ride, complete with his bacon station to keep things light, and FUNimation boot the soundtrack square in the Dragon Ballz, adding the likes of Pantera and Tendril to the proceedings. *Broly*'s no *Path to Power*, but then again, nothing in the *DBZ* universe is, in my opinion. It's a great DVD for fans though—uncut and feature length with some choice extra bits attached—capping off one of the most colossal ass-beatings you'll likely ever witness. **C+**

play MEDIA
Jennifer Garner of Alias, now on DVD!

Confessions of a Dangerous Mind
Miramax
R

George Clooney's directorial debut shows he's got what it takes to be a fine success behind the camera with *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, a sharp, eccentric comedy written by the extremely unconventional Charlie Kaufman (*Adaptation, Being John Malkovich*). The movie stalls at times, taking labored comedic turns and straining to be clever, but its warm emotional pull sustains the dead weight. And how can you deny the remarkable talent of Sam Rockwell, who plays Chuck Barris, the real-life producer of awful TV like *The Dating Game* and *The Gong Show*? Clooney mines excellent performances from his entire cast, surrounding them with a wonderfully rich visual presence and sparkling sense of quirky energy.
Extras: The highlight here is the Real Chuck Barris Documentary and Gong Show Acts, and always entertaining are the inclusion of Deleted Scenes and Behind the Scenes Vignettes. Given that this is Clooney's first time directing, the commentary is especially interesting, along with the input of the very talented cinematographer Newton Thomas Sigel. *-BF*
extras: B
movie: B-

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
New Line
PG-13

It may lack the introductory shock of experiencing a film of such uncommon spirit and grandeur, of such craft and soaring beauty, but this sequel to *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* is an equal in almost every regard. Peter Jackson's ability and uncompromising vision in bringing Tolkien's classic to life on the big screen is a triumph of filmmaking. If the movie is to be criticized for focusing on more vivid action and less characterization,
well, that's its exact intention. It's transfixing to watch Gollum move through the beauty of the world, adding to its mystery and intrigue with his magnificent presence. Every character here is commanding and alive, just as we imagined them to be in the depths of the books. As the center portion of a trilogy, *The Two Towers* completes its purpose with commanding authority.
Extras: With the real feature set coming in the Extended Edition, it'll certainly be worth the patience to wait. But if you have to buy now—you know waiting is impossible—there's a decent list of extras on the disc. Mini featurettes, a Starz Encore and WB special—typical but interesting; Sean Astin's The Long And Short Of It is an entertaining addition. Having a trailer of Return of the King is awesome to see once, but along with a few other additions, obvious filler. *-BF*
movie: A-
extras: B-

28 Days Later
Fox Home Entertainment
R

Only at the very end of this movie can you finally come up for air. Sure, your hands will still be clinched together and everyone will be able to see your white knuckles, but it's all good, man, it's over with. You made it through. It's been a long time since I've seen a good end-of-the-world-holy-crap-there-are-zombies type of movie and *28 Days Later* is one that not only will scare you silly, but it will stay with you long after you've seen it. From the visual style in which it was filmed to the excellent cast to the sheer viciousness of Rage, *28 Days Later* is a stunning example of how an excellent movie can be made without big budgets or fancy special effects. For any horror fan, this DVD is a must-buy.
Extras: Although I would've liked to have seen more features on this disc, I was quite pleased with the alternate endings and deleted scenes (one of which would've made a better ending in my opinion). Audio was excellent but a DTS track would've been the icing on the cake. *-TH*
movie: A
extras: B

Animal House: Double Secret Probation Edition
Universal
R

The 1978 comedy that made way for the likes of *Old School* and is still simply in a raunchy class of its own, *Animal House* is a must for anyone who has lived the outrageous perils of college life. It's always a pleasure to go back and see John Belushi hamming it up as Bluto Blutarsky, the endearing frat freak with serious issues who seems to have no other reason for living other than to charge up the party. The movie generates its laughs from the ensuing mayhem of apoplectic Dean Wormer's (John Vernon) attempts to shut down the boy's domain. You've seen this story duplicated a hundred times, yet nobody pulls it off quite like the original source.
Extras: Nothing too exciting here, other than an amusing Mockumentary featuring the original cast, and the Yearbook: An Animal House Reunion is a treat for true fans of the movie, delving into the experiences of the actors and their production stories. *-BF*
extras: C+
movie: B+

24 Season Two
Fox Home Entertainment
TV-14

The first season of *24* truly changed the way we watched television. With its cool camera angles, adrenaline-inducing storyline, plot twists and, of course, the "happening in real time" aspect, it quickly earned the respect of the industry and its fans. So how could Fox top Season 1? Easy. Let Kiefer Sutherland kick some major ass. Season Two is a total roller coaster ride that will keep you guessing till the very end. Some say the story was a little far-fetched, but that's what TV is all about.
Extras: Presented in 1.78:1, enhanced for 16x9 televisions, the picture quality is superb. Features of the DVD include 44 deleted scenes and very interesting documentary on how they filmed the final episode. More commentary by Kiefer Sutherland would've been nice (the ones he does are very insightful), but overall, the quality of this seven-disc set is extraordinary. *-TH*
movie: A
extras: B

The Real Cancun
New Line Home Entertainment
R

The Real Cancun is about as real as the calculated posturing displayed by the cast of vacuous spring breakers who were hand-picked to booze, inanely discuss sex, "see boobies," dance for the camera and soak their jellyfish stings with urine. Gotta love the slow motion drama, the cinematic touches of ridiculous excess when a digital camera at the petting zoo would have been more enlightening.
Extras: Some deleted scenes, highlights from the premiere, and, oh, those Cast Insights—are these people real? *-BF*
movie: F
extras: D

Onmyoji
New Line Home Entertainment
R

In the mythologically heavy *Onmyoji*, an extremely esoteric tale of demonic lore is told with an excess of pageantry, which is part of its cultural charm. Directed by Yojiro

Takita, the movie is never subtle, grasping for an almost Shakespearean spirit. There's a conspicuous lack of sophistication to the effects and sets, but a spirited sincerity paints the settings of millennium-old Japan with a video-game appeal.
Extras: The production interviews carry more weight given that a unique Japanese film is being discussed; the Making of Onmyoji is uncommonly extensive. *-BF*
movie: B-
extras: B

2Fast 2Furious
Universal
R

I'm all for suspension of disbelief, but c'mon. If tuner-car culture was anywhere near this cool, or this big, it'd have a beer commercial. When you can shut down city streets with fake signs and gather hundreds of beautiful, nearly naked women to watch a race they can't see, call me, and I'll bring the doughnuts. Perhaps the most implausible film in the history of cinema, the first five minutes define creative license run amok. Four "racers," each with $50k minimum in their cars (which are obviously their reason for being) put up big cash for the honor of racing. While they circuit race, shifting for effect (somehow getting boost from jamming the shifter into higher gears), the guy holding the money (a millionaire mechanic with a waterfront...oh, forget it, it's too painful) decides to play a little gag on his homies and....RAISES THE DRAWBRIDGE. This would kill any normal human. But no worries; they have no problem destroying their cars and nearly dying...even the guys (and a girl) who've already lost the race. Uh-huh, this would happen. You show me someone who's invested his life savings in a car who'll jump it off a bridge and I'll show you a brain donor. The testosterone builds from there in what can only be deemed the silliest excuse for showing g-strings and butt cake since the *Baywatch* movie. No Vin Diesel, no Michelle Rodriguez, and, most of all, no Rob Cohen equals 2hard 2watch.
Extras: For those who must partake in the splendor (it is shot well and packed with hot cars and fast women), the DVD spillith over with extras like commentary by director John Singleton, an "inside" featurette, deleted scenes, outtakes, behind the stunts, tricking out your ride, a game trailer and animated anecdotes. Seriously cool extras. *-DH*
movie: D
extras: B

Keep Your Eyes Open
Artisan
R

It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt and all of these athletes have paid the price. My favorite part of *KYEO* is the injury reel where the likes of Mat Hoffman and Travis Pastrana run down their list of injuries. I swear, these two guys are held together by spit and glue. Their broken bones play a stark contrast (and reality check) midway through what can only be described as poetry in motion, as a handful of the world's finest extreme athletes let us hitch a ride on not only their sports but their lives. Ever wonder what compels someone to free-fall 200 feet down a sheer cliff in the middle of British Columbia, or jettison themselves at 60 mph off the largest vert ramp in the world on a BMX bike? The answers lie within. Shot in stunning 35mm with a score produced by the Latch Bros., this film by director Tamra Davis captures surfing, skiing, snowboarding, freestyle motocross and street skating (in the film's only "bit," a pathetic array of annoying cutscenes that mar an otherwise skillful presentation) with admirable style.
Extras: Include commentary and a cool sound effects gallery, but come for the personal interviews; they offer rare perspectives on extreme sports as a lifestyle and career from the best of the best, and are extremely well-produced. *-DH*
movie: B+
extras: A

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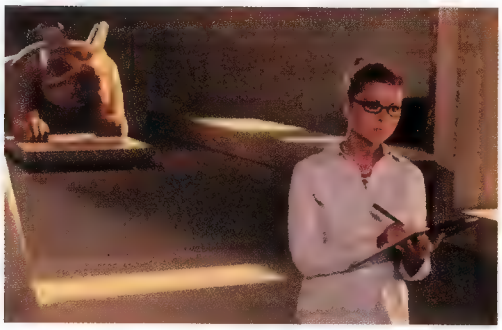
Alone in the Dark

The classic horror series—the true original—goes to the big screen

words brady fiechter



Christian Slater (left), Tara Reid (center) and Stephen Dorff (right) complete the cast.

Interview

Doctor Uwe Boll **Director, Alone in the Dark**

play: Nobody seems to understand exactly how to make video-game movies. What do you think is the biggest problem?
Uwe Boll: That the producers have no feeling for what a video game is. They know video games only from their children.

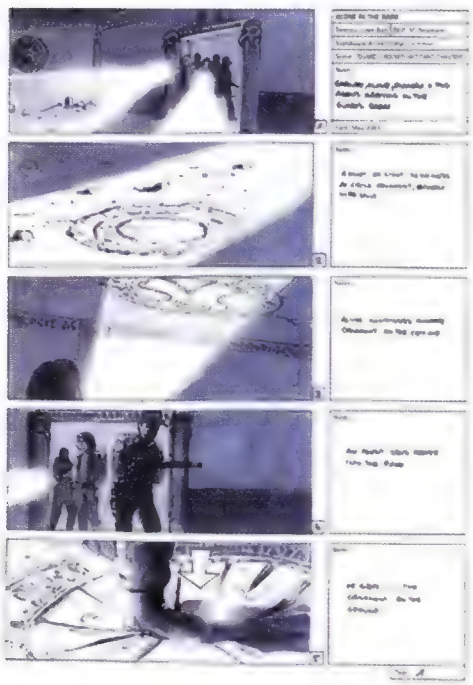
It's interesting how Paramount blamed the *Tomb Raider* game for the lack of success of their movie. Yet again, they seem to miss the point that the movie just wasn't good.
Exactly. The first *Lara Croft* was already shit, but made money because of the money they spent in advertising and because of the famous game.

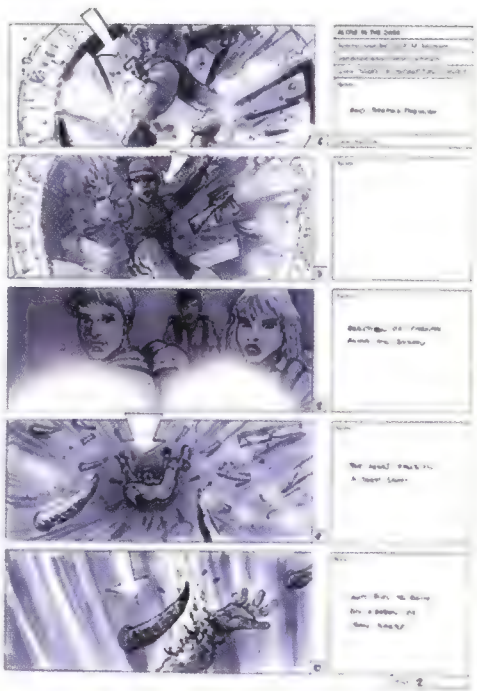
You directed *House of the Dead* as well. You must really enjoy the idea of taking a video game to the big screen.
I think video games are the best sellers for the young generation, and to bring the great ideas and stories to the big screen is my goal. But not what they did with *Lara Croft*; I wanna bring the real mood of a game on the screen.

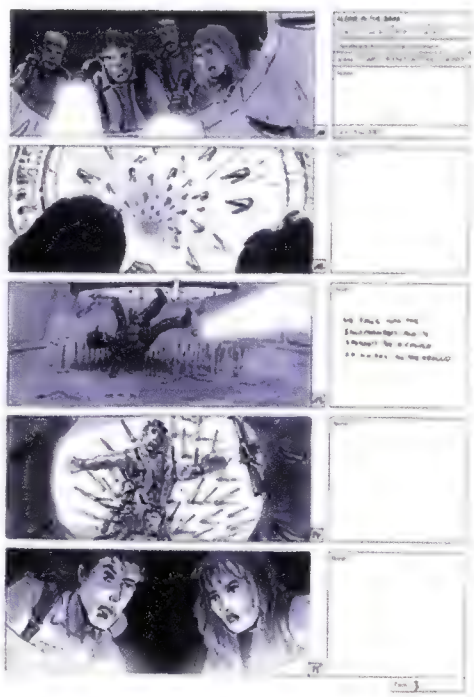
Bringing the real mood of a video game to the screen: would you say that's one of the most important elements, and perhaps what other directors are missing?
If you play a game, there is always something that grabs you, that makes you want to play the game again. This is what you must extract for the movie, together with the main character of the game. Some producers think that all video games are the same, and they use only the title or the general idea of a game. For *Alone in the Dark*, I think it is important that the audience must find out what is going on, that the story has a lot of questions and our main character has a lot of different routes to choose...

Do you like making horror movies? I know the dynamic of creating such a movie can be tough, balancing a good story with fun gore.
I like horror movies as a genre, and I like to make kick-ass movies. *House of the Dead* is totally different from *Alone in the Dark*. *House* is a brutal, gory zombie movie with a lot of funny lines and, in total, just a lot of fun. *Alone* is dark, creepy, with a lot of suspense and a very serious philosophy behind the story: "There is a reason to be afraid in the dark—it is a basic fear."

What are some of the downsides of such a project?
The only downside is that you cannot create a story from zero. You must work with the character of the game. But this is also a big opportunity if you pick the right game.







So your actor Tara Reid made the cover of FHM, and has been identified as one of the sexiest leading ladies.
We changed the part a little to fit her real character in. She is now the assistant of a professor and in love with Edward Carnby. She is great in the part and her image will change with the movie, moving away from that *American Pie* image.

Christian Slater was an interesting choice for the lead role of Edward Carnby.
Slater is great; so is Stephen Dorff. We have the perfect cast, and it looks like Atari is also using Christian for the game, Alone in the Dark 5.

What about *Alone in the Dark* do you think people will be most impressed by?
It is not a cheesy, typical "summer event" movie like *Hulk, Daredevil* or *Lara Croft*, where you, from the beginning on, know how it ends. Alone is really full of suspense, surprises and is really disturbing—like the first *Matrix*.

What about that crazy shootout scene in *House*?
In *House of the Dead*, there is that big battle in front of the house, where you see 4,500 cuts, 25 stunts, 10 explosions and 60,000 bullets shot in 12 minutes, Matrix shots, etc.! I made this sequence in seven nights; on the shooting plan was only written: THE CHAOS CONTINUES. I don't think a similar scene has ever been made in a horror movie; it's the scene that will stay in horror history.

Any nightmare stories to tell? From the outside looking in, a viewer doesn't get to see how difficult the movie-making process really is!
We shot in a mine and there was a scene where an actor gets ripped apart in three pieces. So it took six hours to get him ready with all the prosthetics and blood and guts, etc.! Finally, I said, "Action," and basically the arm got ripped off and then the blood pump didn't stop, and the actor got flooded with the blood—like 150 liters went out of control and sprayed into the cameras and all over us.
On *HOD*, we shot seven nights in pissing rain in the forest; bears were actually around. Jonathan Cherry burnt his hand with a flare gun—like 40 percent of the skin gone.
Filming means every day, 14 hours working. And what is really hard is that you always must wait for the next shot because of camera, lights, effects, etc.! It takes forever to put the puzzle together and as a director you are the motivator, communicator and maybe the only one on set who has the movie in total in his head. All the other crew and cast members are focused on details.

Is *Alone in the Dark* more about scaring people with psychological horror?
Yes. There is gore also, but in general it is more about: you should be scared in the dark. Like after *Jaws*, you don't wanna go in the water. After *Alone*, you are not going where it is dark.

There are a lot of really cool games out there just waiting to be made in to a movie. Are you interested in continuing to make movies based on video games? I think this is really just the beginning of some very cool opportunities.
Correct! I just made a deal for another game. And I really wanna do Hitman, Warcraft, Silent Hill, Halo, Doom, Metal Gear Solid and Grand Theft Auto in the coming years. Bad is that some of the game rights are optioned from people who have no idea how to make a good game movie.

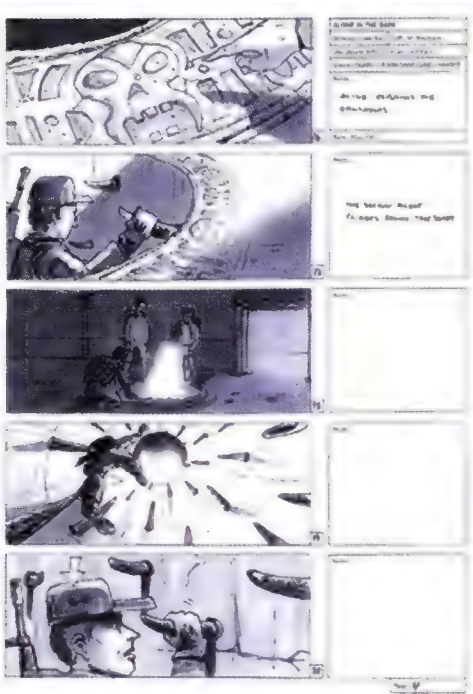
Are you using a lot of the same crew for *Alone in the Dark* that shot *House of the Dead*?
Yes. Great people with credits from *X-Men, Insomnia, Freddy vs. Jason*, etc.

It sounds like you are extremely aware of the video game world. Do you dabble in playing games, or more find them fascinating?
I play if I have the time, and even more, I check out what is new and what's developing in the eye of the fans. So I always walk in to the Internet cafes to play online, like Warcraft, etc., and speak with the other gamers.

Do you feel you learned a lot from shooting *House of the Dead*, taking lessons to *Alone in the Dark*?
Absolutely! I learned the big action setups and working with CGI, green screens, etc. Both movies were a lot of fun, but both movies are hard to make. My DP said to me in the middle of another night of shooting with tons of bullets flying in the air: "Why can't you make *Baywatch*? Nice shooting in the sun on a beach with cute woman!" And he is right. **play**

"My DP said to me in the middle of another night of shooting with tons of bullets flying in the air: 'Why can't you make Baywatch?'"

Before the cameras were ready to roll in Canada, extensive storyboarding set the stage.



PlayStation 2 MTV VMA After Party

words tom ham
photos michael tran

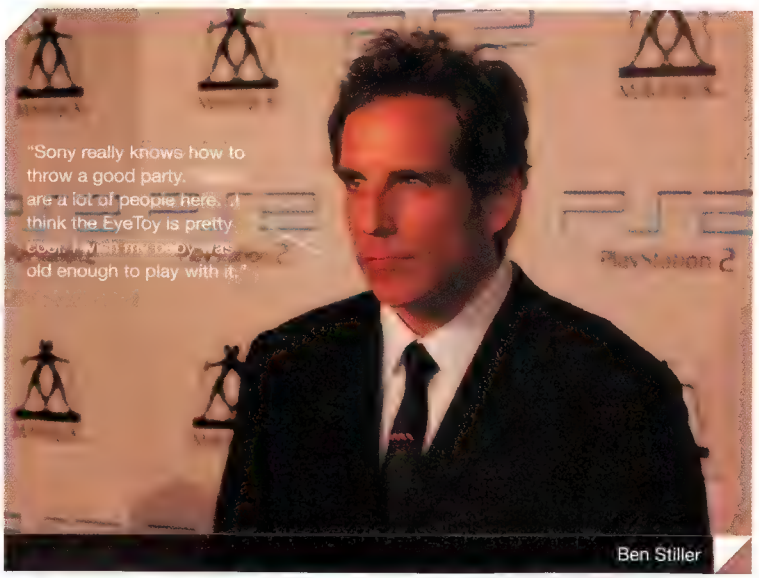
In celebration of the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, PlayStation 2 and Maverick Record's Guy Oseary threw an exclusive after-party at New York's Four Season Restaurant, allowing the fortunate to schmooze with models, celebrities and, of course, rock stars. Much like Sony's celebrity event at E3 this year, the stars really came out and showed their support for PlayStation. Sony even set up a huge EyeToy display so that party guests could give it a go. Who was into it? Who could care less? Who needs a clue? Read on and find out.

MTV VIDEO MUSIC AWARDS AUG.28.2003

Paris Hilton

"This would be fun if I was really drunk & really high."
Jimmy Fallon

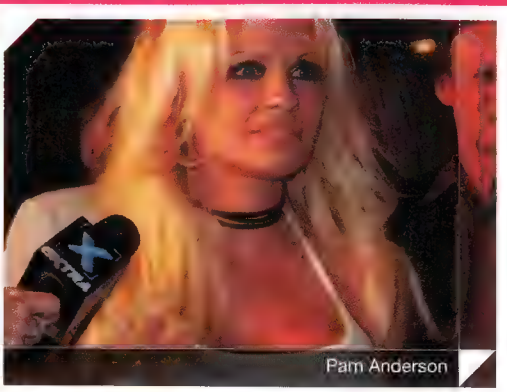
"I've always been a fan of PlayStation and this EyeToy is pretty f**king cool."
Jason Biggs

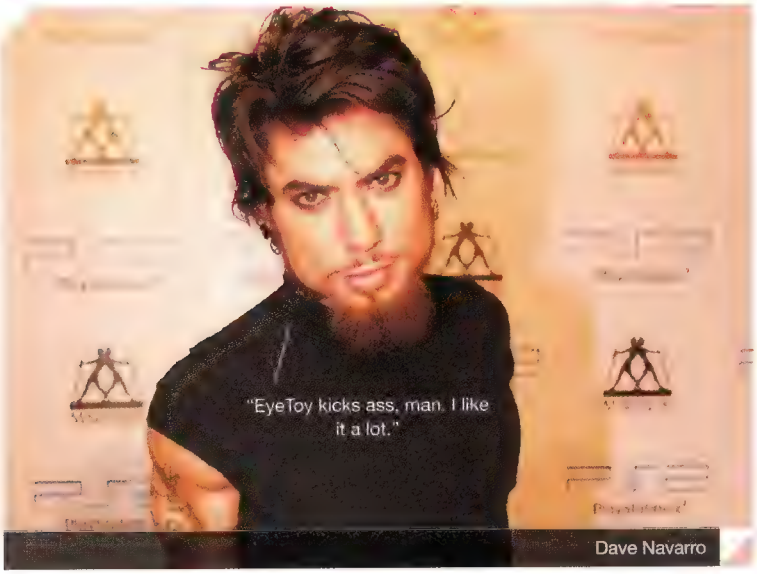


"Sony really knows how to throw a good party. There are a lot of people here. I think the EyeToy is pretty cool. I wish my boys were old enough to play with it."
Ben Stiller

Jessica Alba

Christina Aguilera


Pam Anderson



Dave Navarro

Robert Trujillo and Kirk Hammett of Metallica

Giselle Bundchen

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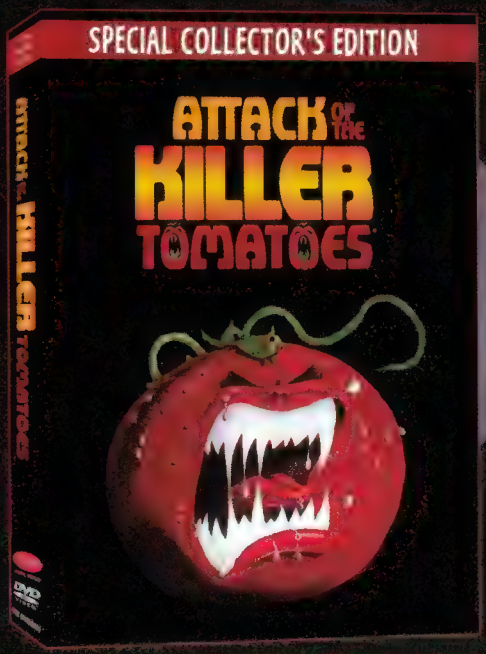

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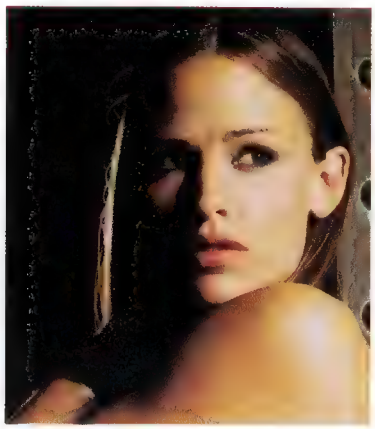
Alias Season One DVD Launch

When Hollywood and video games meet, it's usually in a big way. In conjunction with a recent launch party for the *Alias Season One* DVD, Acclaim Entertainment (the makers of the official Alias game) invited the gaming press to meet Jennifer Garner and the rest of the cast of *Alias*. Being a huge fan of the show, I made my way to the City of Angels where I had the chance to talk games with Miss Garner and creator/director of the show, JJ Abrams, as well some other cast members.



words tom ham
photos michael tran

ALIAS

play: How does it feel having a video game based on *Alias*?
Abrams: I used to play video games all the time with Greg Grunberg; we were roommates for two years and we played video games most of the time. For me, having a video game based on *Alias* is thrilling. But it's only genuinely exciting to me because the game is actually a fun game to play. I know we've all seen games based on movies and TV shows that...you know...should not have gotten made [laughing]. The fact is, with this game, it was important from the beginning that this needs to be a game that we would want to play and that we were proud of. Something that we felt was worthy of the show, and this is the result, and we're really thrilled.

What were you trying to achieve with the video game? Were you trying to create a new experience for someone who hasn't watched the show, or were you planning on broadening what has already been established?
It was a weird thing, you know. I didn't know at the very beginning whether it was going to work—to take something as linear as the story and then try to make a game out of it. It's so easy to say, "Oh, just throw a character in there and have them move around." We would want to make sure that at the end of the day, the game was engaging. That it got your heart going and that it was fun. And even if you didn't know the show, it would work—it would be a wonderful experience. But if you did know the show, playing the game is surreal because it's like an interactive series of episodes. All of the actors did their voices, we had writers on the show do the script for the game—I got to go over the whole thing to make sure it worked—so it's a lot more than what I thought it would be. It's an interactive Alias experience.

What are most excited about with respect to the game?
I'm really excited about the split screen feature, which, for me, is really one of my favorite things. To get drama out of a game definitely presents a challenge, so this split-screen feature helps create it. So with this split screen, you're going in as Sydney and you're going through this mission and then you see on the split screen these bad guys coming after you. So here you are trying to get whatever you need to get done but at the same time you're seeing these guys heading for you. It makes for a very interesting experience. It feels like what we're trying to do on the show—which is what we want to give viewers—that sense of heart-racing drama.

play: Jennifer, how does it feel seeing yourself in the game?
Garner: It really surprised me when I watch her walk [laughing]. She kinda twitches in a very familiar way. And her kicks are technically better than mine but she does a lot of the same moves as I do. She wears the same clothes that I've worn and with the same sort of facial expressions. These Acclaim guys did their homework. This is definitely me playing Sydney in the game. I also did a lot a voice work for this character, which made the whole experience fun on a more animated level.

Are you into video games? Who on the cast is a gamer?
Unlike JJ, I was doing educational things when I was growing up [laughing]. We didn't even have Atari. I was dying to play Frogger when I was little and I wasn't allowed. So I'm definitely not the person to talk to about video games but I can tell you that my Marshall—Kevin Weisman down there—had to walk me through step by step.

play: So you're a big gamer, huh? What sort of games do you like?
Weisman: Yeah, I've always been into games. I have a GameCube in my trailer that I mess around with during shooting. I'm all about the sports games. Love them, can't get enough of them.

Do you just play on consoles?
No, I also play games on the PC but I do wish they had more games on Mac. I have a Mac at home and I can't find any cool games to play on it.

Here's my card, I'll hook you up with some Mac games.
Really? That would be great. I really appreciate it.

play: I had no clue you and JJ were so into video games. That's so rad!
Grunberg: Yeah, we're both really big gamers. Been playing them for years. I like all kinds—console and PC.

Any particular games you like?
Pretty much anything. I like sports (of course), action, shooters...

Yep, that's just like me. I can't get enough.
I just wish I had more time to play. There is never enough time, you know?

Alias Season 1
Buena Vista Home Entertainment
TV-14

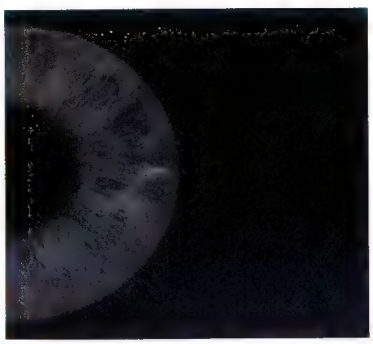
I will never forget the first time I saw an ad for *Alias*. A female secret agent? On ABC? There is no way this show was going to last. Ah, Jennifer! How could I have doubted you? Spanning across six discs, all 22 episodes from Season 1 are included. Key features include commentary by creator/writer/director JJ Abrams, Jennifer Garner and other cast members on select episodes. A very cool Inside Stunts Featurettes shows how some of the various stunts and fight sequences were created, and in addition, there are six deleted scenes, and my favorite, a gag reel with bloopers. Watching Jennifer Garner trying to fit a sub-machine gun in its packing case is just priceless. Presented in 1.78:1, the picture quality is top notch. Coupled with Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround, *Alias* never looked or sounded better.
series: A
extras: B

Alien Ant Farm
TruANT (Dreamworks)

Following a hiatus and recovery from a serious auto accident, the band best known for its groundbreaking rendition of the King of Pop's "Smooth Criminal" proves that you can break the sophomore-slump jinx. The SoCal rockers bring in production from a pair of Stone Temple Pilots, mixing their identifiable rock sound with Latin and tropical influences from time to time. Variety is truly the spice of life—a dash of TruANT will make any meal better. –Lucas Mast

People Under the Stairs
Or Stay Tuned (Om Records)

Stepping out of their niche as one of the best downtempo labels around, Om drops a stellar hip-hop album by duo People Under the Stairs (PUTS). With their sophomore effort, PUTS offers laid-back summer jams destined to have you bobbing your head and tapping your feet. Pump it in your car, or bump it in your home; but beware, the soulful beats are infectious. –LM



Plastikman
Closer (Mute/M-Nus)

Long known as a pioneer of new technologies in electronic music, *Plastikman* (aka Richie Hawtin) gives us a glimpse into what the future of electronica can hold. From his Apple iPod-only sets to his early adoption of the turntable and computer-melding "Final Scratch," Hawtin takes the creation and composition of electronic music to the next level—and beyond—with the haunting and addictive "Closer." –LM

Dub Pistols
Six Million Ways to Live (Distinctive Records)

Just when you thought it was safe to start putting music into convenient genres, the Dub Pistols come along and rip the notion to shreds. From vocals by The Specials' veteran ska-man Terry Hall to hip-hop infusion courtesy of Planet Asia, the Dub Pistols take a break from remixing Limp Bizkit, POD and Korn to put forth a solid follow-up to Point Blank. *Six Million Ways to Live* will serve as a wake-up call to electronica as we know it today. Innovation is the key to success. –LM

Tryforce
Heat Guy J Original Soundtrack: "Burn" (Pioneer)

Haven't seen the greatest anime show of '03 yet? Let the sounds of Tryforce nudge you into it. From the rock/jazz fusion of Tribe to the vocals of Face (which you will sing in Japanese), a most eclectic, magnetic amalgam of modern music awaits. Take a vacation from the pop charts; bask in the serenity of Interchange, revel to the liquid "God Never Knows," and let "Midtown Blues" sweep you away. Stand-alone anime soundtracks don't often strike such a chord, but this is an exceptional work swathed in the best of Japan. –Dave Halverson

Elbow
Cast of Thousands (VR)

Sitting comfortably in the archetype of British mood rock—file next to Doves and Coldplay—*Cast of Thousands* is at times calming, at times cookie cutter, at times uplifting, always full of affecting hooks and introspective appeal. If the tunes blend into the familiar, there's no reason to complain when the generic sounds so good. As Elbow's sophomore achievement, *Cast of Thousands* shows signs of a band destined to stick around, standing tall in the inspired company they keep. –Brady Fiechter

Kenna
New Sacred Cow (Columbia)

As the record industry flounders, executives continue to throw their hands in the air in desperate confusion, refusing to stop the flow of homogenized, overpriced albums. The bloat of polished rock is starting to stink, which makes Ethiopian-born Kenna's *New Sacred Cow* that much more refreshing. The album wants to take you back to the '80s, but not in the way you might think: its synth-pop sparkle is infectious and at times heavy-hitting, grabbing a modern sound while sticking to delicious old-school electronic cheese. These are songs you can dance to, sing to, toss on at a party to drive the energy up. Kenna's got room to improve on his limp poetics, but you can't deny the ripe flavor of his beats. –BF

Vertical Horizon
Go (RCA)

Getting their start as a stripped-down acoustic college band, Vertical Horizon plugged in their guitars and quickly met with canned commercial success. The sound on their latest album hasn't changed a bit: open choruses, melodic structures, simple songwriting. VH has got a knack for making their innocuous, radio-friendly grooves stick with you, and songs like "Sunshine" and "One of You" have a sharp, anthemic edge, but you can't help growing a little weary of the prepackaged sound. –BF

Multifunctional handheld

Zodiac

www.tapwave.com
price: $299.00

Coming out in October is a unique little device called Zodiac. Manufactured by a company called Tapwave, the Zodiac is a handheld unit that will not only handle all of your basic, daily operations like contacts, calendar and memos, but it was constructed from the ground up to be a full-fledged gaming device. Running an enhanced version of the Palm OS 5.2.6 operating system, the Zodiac is capable of PlayStation-quality graphics. You read correctly. Powering the Zodiac is a Motorola i.MX1 ARM9 processor and an ATI Imageon graphics accelerator that utilizes the FatHammer X-Forge 3D graphics engine, which can handle the most demanding gaming and multimedia applications. The screen is a high resolution (480 X 320) 16-bit color display. Audio is handled by a Yamaha sound chip and built-in stereo speakers. And it gets better for gaming: the Zodiac has an analog control stick, integrated triggers and four action buttons. The unit also has built-in Bluetooth for wireless multiplayer gaming for up to eight players at once. The Zodiac can also play MP3s, view photos and even play back QuickTime, AVI, MPEG1 and MPEG4 files. Expanding usability, the Zodiac allows for two SD memory card slots up to 1GB each and SD I/O peripherals. How is game support? Four games will be at launch including Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4, Doom II, Neverwinter Nights and Spy Hunter. Over 400 game developers have signed up for the Tapwave development program and requested the software development kit.

Laptop PC

Tosihiba Satellite P25-S807

www.toshiba.com
Price: $2,599.00 direct from Toshiba

With screen resolutions supporting 1,440 X 900 pixels, an impressive 17-inch widescreen XGA active matrix display and the Intel P4 2.8GHz processor running under the hood, the P25-S807 is exceptional if you're looking for a great desktop replacement for an excellent price. Other key features include a DVD-R/RW drive, a 60 GB HD, 512 MB of RAM and integrated dual-band Wi-Fi. Putting this into the "Man, that laptop rocks" category is the video card, an Nvidia GeForce FX Go5200. Not only was watching DVD movies (in widescreen no less) pure nirvana, but we were able to play the most resource-heavy games like UT2003 and Tron 2.0 at the highest resolutions without any issues. Sound quality was great (courtesy of built-in Harmon and Kardon speakers) with music, but some games really pushed the limits of the speakers. A sub-woofer would've been a nice inclusion. For what it offers (and it offers quite a bit), the price is extremely reasonable. To reiterate, this laptop rocks

Control devices

Nyko Air Flo EX / Nyko iType 2

www.nyko.com
Air-Flo EX $29.99
iType 2 $39.99

Got sweaty palms? No worries. Nyko has just released their latest Air Flo controllers for the PS2 and Xbox. With an improved design from previous models, the new Air Flo EX features a new exclusive grip design, improved 8-way D-pad response and, of course, improved airflow. Each controller comes with two variable airflow speeds and 10-foot cables. Although the dual analogs performed just as well as standard dual-shocks, we were a little disappointed by the D-pad. Previous models felt a little loose and the new Air Flo controllers still feel the same. Aside from that, these are great controllers.

Of all the new controllers released by third-party peripheral makers, none are as functional and cool as the new Nyko iType 2. Set aside your Logitech NetPlay Controller—come on, did you really want to play with such a big device? The iType 2's keyboard is similar to Qwerty keyboards found in two-way pagers and some PDAs. We were able to chat away without any trouble. Even if you have fat...eh...large fingers, the keyboard's keys are large enough to prevent typos. All this and vibration too? You can't go wrong.

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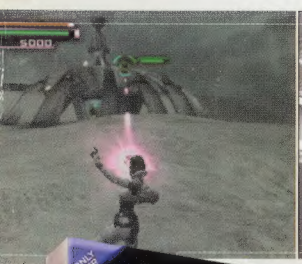
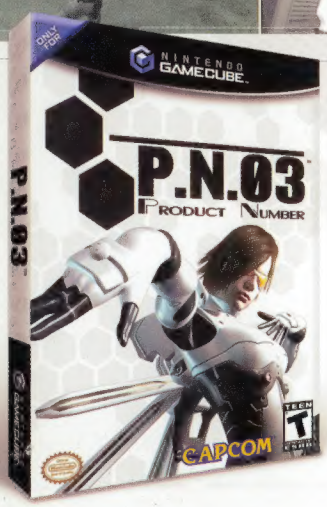


master stylish moves and powerful attacks for enhanced choreographed gameplay



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